Author: Nahuse
Illustrator: Gin
Environmental Artist: yish
Mechanical Designer: cell
Rebuild World I
Part Two
Crazy, Reckless, and Rash

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The height of true hunting is to
gamble your life and win a fortune!
To live fast and die fast!

Rebuild World I

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Crazy, Reckless, and Rash

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>Episode 001

Part Two Crazy, Reckless, and Rash

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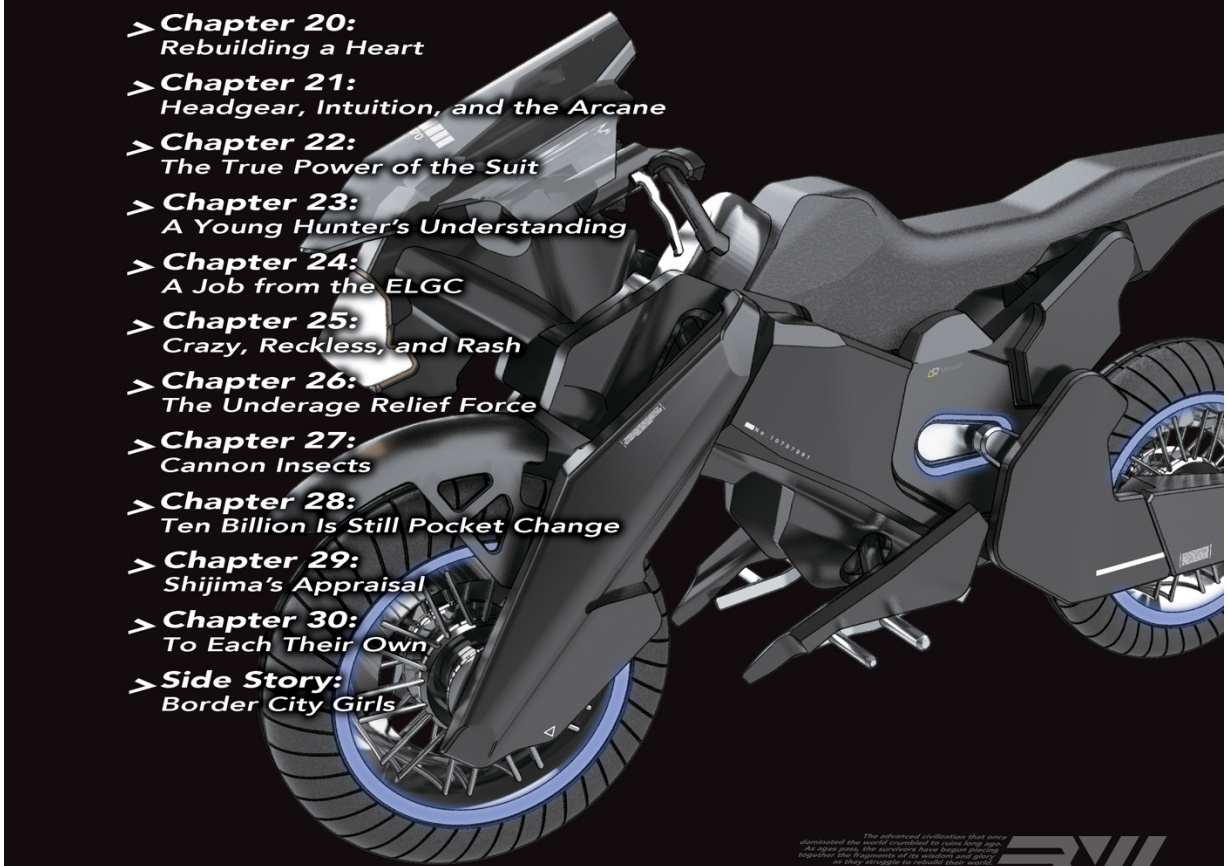

The advanced civilization that once dominated the world crumbled to ruins long ago. As ages pass, the survivors have begun piecing together the fragments of its wisdom and glory as they struggle to rebuild their world.

Rebuild World RW

Chapter 15: Thank-yous and Debts

Akira found himself standing in the midst of an endless whiteness, a space as barren as if it had never finished being created. But he felt neither nervous nor surprised; at some dim level of awareness, he realized that he was dreaming.

A gorgeous woman stood beside him. Her face, almost impossibly beautiful, revealed her to be Alpha, the woman he had met under mysterious circumstances back on his first day as a hunter in the Kuzusuhara Town Ruins. Although she looked perfectly real to him, no one could touch her, and almost no one could even see or hear her. But despite her secrets, to him she was his savior. She always wore a cheerful smile for him, except when he was in danger, and so he always thought of her as having that expression.

Which was why he was slow to recognize her now. Her face was blank, and her gaze focused straight ahead, like a puppet without a puppeteer. Yet he could hear her speaking:

"Attempt number one: failure. Destination not reached. Continuation impossible due to death of subject. Support procedures require review."

She spoke as if she were merely reading through some records. Her voice gave no indication of interest as she continued:

"Attempt number two: failure. Destination not reached. Continuation impossible due to death of subject. Combat support procedures require review."

She rattled off a few more records. "Attempt number fifteen: failure. Destination not reached. Continuation impossible due to breach of contract. Subject living but declined request due to injury. Guidance procedures require adjustment.

"Attempt number sixteen: failure. Area One reached. Continuation impossible due to death of subject. Combat support procedures require additional review."

Alpha's expression never changed. Was she completely oblivious to

Akira's presence?

"Attempt number eighty-seven: failure. Area Seven reached. Continuation impossible due to death of subject. Combat support procedures require additional review.

"Attempt number eighty-eight: failure. Area Four reached. Continuation impossible due to breach of contract. Subject living but declined request due to loss of motivation. Guidance procedures require adjustment."

She kept droning on, but gradually a pattern emerged from her words, a story of slow but persistent progress toward some unknown goal.

"Attempt number 497: failure. Area Nine reached. Continuation impossible due to death of subject. Combat support procedures require additional review.

"Attempt number 498: failure. Final area reached. Continuation impossible due to breach of contract. Subject entirely hostile. Disposal complete. Overall guidance procedures require additional review."

And then there was one last item, different from all the ones that came before:

"Attempt number 499: in progress. Destination not reached. Assessing particulars. End of report."

When Alpha finished speaking, the infinite whiteness vanished. All that was left was her figure, standing out clearly in the total darkness, and even that quickly dimmed, blurred, and melted away. Akira's consciousness faded with her, until at last all awareness was gone.

Akira woke with the lingering sensation that he'd had a strange dream, but he couldn't recall what it was about. Then he realized that he was lying on a bed in an unfamiliar room, and the shock swept away any trace of the dream from his mind. Not long ago, Akira would have leaped up and begun scanning his surroundings in a panic. But now he was surprised rather than alarmed, his mind still muddled with sleep.

Back in the alleyways of the slums—his old home—this sort of carelessness might have gotten him killed. But he'd been living better since becoming a hunter, and as even the cheapest hotel was far safer than the streets, he no longer woke up on full alert. His greatest source of confidence, however, was the now-familiar person watching him, her usual smile reassuring him that all was well—Alpha.

Good morning, Akira, she said. *Did you sleep well?*

Akira sat up in bed and attempted to put two and two together.

The room looked too lived-in for a hotel. His body had been wiped clean of the blood and muck of battle, and his clothes had been exchanged for a set of lightweight white pajamas. He was in perfect health—totally rested, refreshed, and free from pain. So his sleepy brain turned to other questions.

Morning, Alpha. Where are we? he asked with evident confusion.

Alpha simply pointed to the door, just as a woman he recognized walked in.

"Akira! I didn't know you were awake," said the newcomer, surprised to see him up.

Her name was Sara, and she was one of a pair of female hunters whom Akira had once rescued. But he had kept out of sight at the time and avoided contact with them afterward, so they didn't recognize him as their savior. Sara used nanomachines to enhance her physical powers; she kept her supply stored in her chest, which grew or shrank accordingly. At the moment, both had definitely been growing. Out in the wasteland, she had to squeeze her swollen breasts into an elastic suit of body armor; at home, however, she wanted to give them some room to breathe. Showing a little skin was a small price to pay for comfort, and so all she wore at the moment was a baggy shirt—large enough for her greatest bust size—and her underwear.

"How do you feel?" she asked, smiling with concern as she approached the boy. "Don't force yourself out of bed if you're not feeling up to it yet."

Akira took her easygoing attitude as a sign that they were in a safe place.

"I'm, uh, fine," he said truthfully.

"I'm glad to hear it," Sara replied, relieved to see him in good health. "Welcome to Elena's and my home. Don't worry about your stuff; it's all in the other room. We washed your clothes and put them there too, but I can bring them over if you want to change."

"Oh, I'll get them myself."

"Let me. You're a guest, so take it easy. I'll be back with them in a sec."

Akira had been caught up in the moment until Sara left the room. But once the door closed behind her, he began to panic.

Alpha, what's going on?! he demanded.

First of all, you're in a safe place, so calm down, Alpha replied serenely.

Easy for you to say, he grumbled.

They'll get suspicious if you know too much right after waking up here, and you can't exactly tell them that you got the details from me. Start by trying to remember as much as you can about what happened before you passed out.

I passed out? Akira repeated uncertainly. Then he remembered. *Oh, that's right. I collapsed in the truck after the fight with all those monsters.*

◆

Shortly before Akira fainted, a pack of monsters had attacked him in the desert. The beasts had been pursuing the truck of a merchant named Katsuragi, and poor Akira had gotten caught up in their assault. Even when Akira and the traders had joined forces, they'd stood no chance against the vast horde. There they would have fallen, lost in the billows of dust that arose in the monsters' wake, had not Sara and her partner Elena come to their rescue, responding to an emergency job request that Katsuragi had posted online during the chase.

The jaded Akira, used to his rotten luck, found it difficult to believe that hunters he had once saved had just happened to save him in turn. Inside the trailer of Katsuragi's semitruck, which doubled as a mobile store, he bowed to Sara and said, "Thank you so much for saving us. I would have died without you."

"Don't mention it. I'm getting paid," she replied, smiling. "The job turned out easier than we expected because you guys took out so many of them."

As they chatted, Sara showed Akira her good-luck charm—a pendant fashioned from a rifle cartridge, which she wore nestled in her cleavage. The sight grabbed Akira's attention, and Alpha was quick to tease him for it. Akira quickly turned their conversation to the trailer's cargo.

Meanwhile, Elena and Katsuragi negotiated the compensation for the emergency listing.

"You're broke? Are you kidding me?" Elena demanded.

"No, no—not broke, exactly," Katsuragi hastily responded, flinching. "Don't get me wrong: I have every intention of paying you. I'm just a little short on liquid assets at the moment."

The attractive Elena glared at him even harder. “If you couldn’t pay on the spot, you should have put a special clause in your listing. Do you realize how much our ammo cost?”

“I...I know, but it was an *emergency* listing,” Katsuragi argued, reflecting privately that it was unwise to anger a beautiful woman—especially one who had just annihilated a swarm of monsters. “You can’t expect me to stop so I can write out those little details while I’m running for my life! I wasn’t trying to pull a fast one on you, I swear! Look at the merchandise we’ve hauled all this way!” Katsuragi made a broad sweep with his arm that indicated his cargo of high-end gear, which he had transported at risk of his life from the Front Line. Such equipment was out of reach of all but the most successful hunters. “A hunter like you ought to know what a fortune all this gear will sell for! Just be patient, and I’ll have your money in next to no time—plus a little extra to sweeten the deal, of course! How does that sound?”

Seeing that the trader wasn’t all talk, Elena calmed down a bit. She eyed the cargo appraisingly, considering the proposal. Katsuragi watched her closely, looking for the right moment to seal the deal.

Akira took the opportunity to examine the goods as well, as did Sara, who—experienced as she was—had rarely seen genuine Front Line gear.

Even Alpha seemed a little impressed by the quality of the equipment. *I can hardly wait until you can use advanced weapons like these, Akira*, she remarked.

Be patient, I’m working on it, he replied. *Which one would you like me to work toward, hypothetically speaking?*

Of the selection here? This one, I suppose. Alpha pointed to a cannon that looked far too massive for an ordinary human to carry. The cumbersome barrel, with its enormous dark mouth, looked more appropriate for a humanoid mech. On its side it bore the logo of its manufacturer.

No way in hell could I lug this thing around, Akira protested.

Wait until you get a powered suit. Naturally, a gun like this is out of the question until then.

A powered suit, huh? Sounds pricey. And I can’t even imagine how much one of these guns costs.

That’s true, putting together a set of gear to match this gun won’t be easy, Alpha admitted. *I suppose I’ll have to be a little patient after all.*

Akira reflected that he would need gear like this someday if he ever hoped to hold up his end of his deal with Alpha. Thinking of how much work it would take to get there, he groaned.

Just then, Sara followed his gaze, and her eye fell upon the same weapon. “Wow! Check this out, Elena!” she cried. “They’ve got a Ragnarok!”

Elena hurried over, equally surprised at finding a weapon they had only ever seen online. “You’re not kidding!” she said. “Doesn’t this thing fire annihilation warheads?”

“You bet it does,” Katsuragi interjected, swaggering up to emphasize his financial prospects. “It’s the cream of this shipment. If you knew what I went through to get my hands on—” The merchant noticed the way Elena was eyeing the gun and suddenly grew apprehensive. “Wait, what do you have in mind?”

“You could just barely handle it, couldn’t you, Sara?” Elena murmured, wearing the smile she reserved for haggling.

“Hang on! Let’s not rush things!” Katsuragi pleaded frantically. “Don’t ask the impossible! I can’t give that up!”

“But unless you have money, we’ll just have to select our payment from your stock.”

“Be reasonable! That gun’s worth way more than I owe you!”

“You’re the one being unreasonable here,” Elena snapped, spearing the merchant with a glare. “Do you expect us to sit around waiting for our money? You haven’t covered our ammo or our fee, and we don’t know when—or even *if*—you’ll be able to. We have lives to live too, you know.”

Katsuragi recognized that Elena’s anger was partly a negotiating tactic, but he was still at a loss to respond. As a businessman, he knew that it was his fault if he couldn’t pay. He himself had had no scruples about taking the money, goods, rights, and sometimes even lives of defaulting customers in the past. Realizing that he didn’t have a leg to stand on, and sensing that Akira and Elena were acquainted, he cast a pleading look at the boy.

Does he expect me to bail him out? Akira wondered.

I shouldn’t have to tell you this, but don’t butt in and get yourself mixed up in their business, Alpha cautioned.

I know. Akira held his peace and looked away from the trader. If he sided with anyone, it would be with the hunters who had just saved his life.

Katsuragi looked glum, as if hurt by a close companion—all a ploy to solicit sympathy, of course. Elena, however, seemed utterly unmoved, so he sighed and grimly persevered in bargaining from a position of weakness. In the end, thanks in part to his heartfelt pleas, he managed to strike a deal: Elena and Sara would stay on as the merchant's bodyguards—for an additional fee, of course—and he would forfeit the Ragnarok to them if he failed to pay up by a set date. The hunters agreed, as much to keep an eye on the traders as for the money.

I guess negotiating's harder than it looks, Akira commented, impressed by their cutthroat bargaining.

With all that money on the line? Absolutely, Alpha replied brightly. *You risk your life hunting to get paid too, remember? They put everything on the line for the things they're haggling over, so it's no surprise that they brought out every trick in the book.*

I get that. I was just thinking that I could never argue like that. Although I guess I'll have to someday. He had just witnessed a clash between veterans, and the skirmish—so different from the kind of fighting he was used to—had shaken his confidence.

Have no fear, Alpha responded with self-assurance. *You've got my support! So don't worry about trap clauses or tricky contracts—just leave that side of things to me.*

Thanks. You're a real lifesaver. Suddenly, the boy's vision blurred. *Huh? Is something wrong?*

Not really, but my eyesight's a little off.

Everything around him began to swim and fade out. His strength gave out, and he collapsed on the spot, unable to pick himself up. Vaguely, he saw Elena and Sara rushing toward him. He thought that they were saying something, but he couldn't make out the words—only that they seemed frantic.

Yet somehow he could still see and hear Alpha clearly. The difference did not strike him as strange.

Well, you're bound to be physically and mentally exhausted after going up against that many monsters, she said, smiling down at him as usual. *It's all right now, so get some rest.*

Her reassurance helped calm his muddled thoughts, and he promptly blacked out.

◆

Despite remembering everything leading up to that moment, Akira still didn't understand how he'd ended up sleeping in Elena and Sara's home.

Is some of it coming back to you now? Try asking Sara for the details next, Alpha said, seeing his look of confusion return. *I'll fill you in on the rest later, okay?*

All right, Akira agreed. But it proved impossible for him to wait calmly for Sara's return. He knew he was safe, yet felt nervous anyway—and the paradox made him feel even more agitated. So he was hardly at ease when Sara returned with his clothes. The fact that she remained watching as he dressed himself did nothing to help.

"Would you like a hand?" Sara asked kindly, mistaking his awkward movements for signs that he was not fully recovered.

"I...I'm good," he managed to say.

"Are you sure? You shouldn't push yourself when you're just getting back on your feet."

It felt so strange to Akira to have someone sounding concerned for him that he found himself struggling even more with his clothes—until he noticed Alpha laughing at him. After that, he took care to stay calm and quickly finished changing.

"Um, Sara, would you mind bringing me up to speed?" he asked, pulling himself together. "I remember everything until I passed out in Katsuragi's truck, but, uh, nothing after that."

"Of course," Sara replied, nodding sympathetically, and sat down beside him. "For starters, you've been out of it for three days."

Akira started. Sara looked him in the eye and gently recounted what he had missed out on. As soon as he had collapsed, she and Elena had checked to make sure he didn't have any major external injuries. Stains on his clothes showed that he'd suffered considerable blood loss, but the medicine he'd taken preemptively had fully closed his wounds and kept his breathing and pulse stable. The massive doses that he'd taken in quick succession had healed his injuries so rapidly that they'd left scars, but that was all—nothing worse. So the hunters had concluded, to their relief, that his condition was stable and that, even in the worst case, his life was in no danger.

"You really frightened me when you collapsed," Sara added. "I'm glad

you're all right. And I'm sorry for pushing you to stay on your feet when you were that worn out from fighting."

"Don't be," Akira replied. "I thought I was fine too, right up until everything suddenly went black. Sorry I startled you."

With Akira out cold, Elena and Sara had urged Katsuragi and Darius to hurry back to the city, and the merchants had raised no objections. Since Akira had shown no sign of waking, the hunters had decided to bring him to their home and put him on bed rest until he recovered on his own. As far as they could tell, he was suffering from an overdose of medicine—not fatal, but probably requiring several days of sleep.

"Elena, Katsuragi, Darius, and I all talked it over and decided that you weren't in bad enough shape to need a hospital visit," Sara added.

Most of the first-aid pills floating around the east contained a mixture of medical nanomachines and various drugs—in essence, a set of materials and tools to patch up a hole in a wall. The nanomachines in some high-end medicines even closed wounds by acting as substitute cells. But, as convenient as they were, the capsules were not without their side effects. Rapid cycles of damaging and healing cells could result in sudden aging, while malfunctioning nanomachines could misdiagnose an injured state as normal and actually get in the way of healing. In Akira's case, he'd taken medicine primarily intended to treat injuries in order to restore his stamina instead; he was hardly the first person to drop unconscious after trying such a stunt. Most people who suffered this effect remained in a coma until the nanomachines they'd overdosed on settled down.

"If we really wanted to play it safe, we should've taken you to a clinic," Sara explained. "But you know how those places are. You could've ended up with an exam fee, and needing to update your insurance, and who knows what else? We didn't want to risk it."

"Oh, don't worry about that. You made the right call," Akira said, brushing off her concern with an awkward grin. They both knew what it was like to be strapped for cash.

Confident that a few days of rest were all Akira needed, Elena and Sara had settled him into a bed at their place. Sure enough, he'd finally woken up three days later.

Akira listened to Sara's whole story, and when she finished, he bowed politely and said, "I can't thank you enough for saving my life, and for

taking care of me afterward."

"Don't mention it," Sara replied.

Touched by her kindness, Akira smiled slightly, but his face soon turned apologetic. "You, um, technically rescued me as part of that emergency listing, right?" he asked. "I hate to say this after all you've done for me, but, well..." He hesitated. "I'm broke. How am I supposed to pay you?"

Had it been up to Akira, he would have paid what he owed at once, but his wallet was of a different opinion. Yet he realized right away that his words could be taken to mean she shouldn't expect him to pay her back at all. Embarrassed, he dropped his eyes.

Sara, however, immediately shook her head. "Like I told you earlier, don't sweat it. You didn't ask for our help, and we're not planning to ask you for money."

"Are you sure? But, well, I mean..." Akira faltered. He was grateful, but also reluctant to accept Elena and Sara's help gratis. Of course, he couldn't pay them mere gratitude either.

Seeing his worried look, Sara grew more serious. "If you want to give us something for our trouble, Akira, how about answering a question for me?" she suggested. "Honestly, if you can."

"Sure. What do you want to know?" Akira responded, his face lighting up. He couldn't guess what her question would be, but it sounded like a small price to pay. Even so, he grew nervous under Sara's intent gaze.

She hesitated for just an instant, then braced herself and said, "You were the one who bailed us out in the Kuzusuhara Town Ruins, weren't you?"

Akira went rigid.

◆

A short time earlier, while Akira was still out cold at her home, Sara paid a visit to Shizuka's store alone. The boy's misfortune came up in the course of their usual small talk.

"It sounds like Akira's had a rough time of it too, getting mixed up in a fight with that many monsters," the manager remarked, smiling sadly.

"And twice in one day," Sara agreed, with the same expression. "I bet not many people can say that. I don't know if the bad luck came from Akira, that Katsuragi guy and his partner, or all of the above, but there was

plenty to go around. Of course, no one died, so we can laugh about it now."

"Still, he must be a good hunter if he survived more or less unscathed. I won't comment on the merchants' performance, since I'm in the same line of work," Shizuka quipped, though her tone suggested she could add a few choice comments about Katsuragi and Darius if she wished.

"You're right that those traders couldn't catch a break. First they got chased by monsters, then shaken down by Elena," Sara chuckled. She knew what Shizuka was getting at: the ammunition she had used to save the merchants hadn't been free, and it had come from Shizuka's store. Sara admitted as much as she went on, "Not that we can afford to cut them any slack—we invested some pricey ammo into that rescue operation, and we've got our own livelihoods to worry about. Katsuragi whined about us eating up his profits from the trip to the Front Line, but, well, them's the breaks. Am I wrong?"

"Not really."

On the surface, it sounded like a typical conversation between the owner of a shop catering to hunters and one of her regular customers, but Shizuka felt that Sara was beating about the bush.

"So, where's Elena?" Shizuka asked.

"She's nearby, guarding Katsuragi and keeping an eye on him," Sara replied. "I'm on a quick break."

"I see." Shizuka switched from lighthearted banter to serious discussion in a mere moment. "Now, why are you really here?" she asked, though she'd guessed the truth.

Surprise flicked across Sara's face; then she gave a resigned smile and likewise grew serious. "I've told you about the time someone saved us in the Kuzusuhara Town Ruins, right?"

"Yes. So many times that I remember every detail."

"Shizuka, are you sure you don't know who that someone was?" Sara asked. She kept her gaze fixed on her friend, but the shopkeeper's face gave nothing away.

"Why ask me?" Shizuka replied after considering how to respond.

"Because you have good instincts."

"Oh. In that case, I have no idea."

"Shizuka." Sara spoke sternly and looked the other woman in the eye. Hunters naturally developed an intimidating air, and Sara unconsciously let

hers start seeping out.

But Shizuka was unfazed; she did business with hunters, and their threats no longer rattled her. Moreover, she knew Sara too well to panic. "That's what I'd tell you, regardless of what I know," she calmly admonished her friend. "If I didn't have a clue, I'd be honest; and if I did have a hunch about who it was, and I turned out to be wrong, I'd be making trouble for them and for you." Remembering another friend of hers, she added, "If I did know, and whoever it was had asked me to keep quiet, I couldn't tell you without betraying their trust."

Then the businesswoman in her came to the fore: "Even if they hadn't asked me to keep quiet, I wouldn't tell you if I thought that they wouldn't want you to know. It's none of my business, and I don't want a reputation for spreading gossip about my customers. In any case, the answer is 'I don't know.'"

Sara frowned, finding herself unable to respond.

"Besides," Shizuka continued without changing her expression, "that's not really why you came here, is it?"

Sara started. "How do you figure?" she asked, confused.

"You think you know exactly who helped you. Your intuition tells you that you're right, but your reason and experience disagree. So, you want me to clear away your doubts for you, even if I'm only guessing. Am I wrong?"

Shizuka was exactly right, although Sara herself hadn't realized it until the shopkeeper pointed it out. The childish scrawl on the note from their rescuer, Akira's reaction to her rifle-cartridge pendant, and the powerful medicine that the boy carried all led Sara to suspect that Akira had been their savior in the ruins. The medicine she'd found while sorting through his belongings had been especially convincing—perfectly matching the package they'd received—but none of her evidence was definitive. And Sara's experience as a hunter told her that Akira lacked the skill to pull off a rescue in the face of such overwhelming odds.

So she had come to Shizuka hoping that the latter would resolve her doubts. Both Sara and Elena respected their friend's insight and knew that her keen intuition could sometimes be a better guide than rational evidence. The hunter now realized, to her dismay, that she had been hoping for Shizuka to confirm that Akira was their benefactor.

"Now," Shizuka said, "how much do you want to know? Are you just

curious about who helped you, or are you dying to know every last detail?"

"W-Well..." Sara didn't know what to say. She could think of any number of questions, but how many of those did she really need answers to? Only a handful.

"Think it over and, once you've figured out what you truly want to know, ask whoever it is you suspect. Ask sincerely, and if they lie to you..." She shrugged. "Well, that's life."

Sara was silent as Shizuka's point sunk in. What if Akira told her that he didn't know what she was talking about? If he was telling the truth, then she had made a mistake. And if he was lying, then either he really didn't want to talk about it, or he wanted to avoid getting too involved with her and Elena. Regardless, asking the boy once he woke up would settle the issue. Yet Sara hesitated—at some level, she really didn't want him to say no. And she finally perceived that this desire was the only thing holding her back.

She still didn't know why the thought of a negative response bothered her, although she suspected that Shizuka might. The shopkeeper had, after all, probably seen through her motivations long before she had. Even so, she refrained from asking—this was a question she ought to answer for herself.

"You win," Sara acquiesced, content for the time being. "I'll do the asking when the time comes. Thanks, Shizuka."

"You're welcome," Shizuka replied, equally satisfied. Then her eyes sparkled. "Now, let me tell you my hunch, just for reference. Do you know what an Old Domain User is?"

"Not really, although I think I've heard the term."

"Ask Elena for the details—I'm sure she knows all about it. In simple terms, it means someone who can connect to Old World networks in a way we don't really understand."

Sara couldn't see what this information had to do with Akira, so Shizuka added, "I hear that some of them can access data that shows them the layout of a ruin and the exact position of every person and monster inside it. It's a handy ability, but most Users have to put up with a lot as a result."

Sara began to connect the dots. If Shizuka's information was correct, it would explain how someone with Akira's limited ability had been able to help them. If the boy could tell precisely where everyone was, despite the colorless fog, then his opponents might as well have been blindfolded. And

now she also understood why he wanted to stay concealed: if someone suspected he was an Old Domain User, it might cost him his life.

Sara fixed Shizuka with a reproachful stare. “That’s a hell of a hunch. Couldn’t you have told me that up front?”

“While you still weren’t sure what exactly it was you wanted to know?” Shizuka replied cheerfully. “Anyway, good luck.”

Sara groaned. She found herself agreeing with the shopkeeper, but she wasn’t happy about it.

“Elena, what do you know about Old Domain Users?” Sara abruptly asked that night, when her partner entered their living room, still dripping from the bath and doing something on a head-mounted data terminal.

She was naked apart from her towel. Not as curvy as Sara, whose figure tended to draw men’s eyes, Elena’s charm took a different form. She was lithe and graceful, with well-cared-for skin, and possessed an aura of life and sensuality even at the worst of times. Now, with the last droplets of water trickling down her body, she seemed positively irresistible.

But to Sara, for whom familiarity had bred contempt, Elena just looked sloppy. Sara had warned her not to be careless before, but Elena, unruffled, had simply replied that the device on her head was waterproof. So Sara gave up.

“That’s an unusual question, coming from you,” Elena replied, startled.

“I’m just curious,” Sara explained. “Shizuka said you’d be the person to ask.”

“What do you want to know, exactly? Since you’re making a point to ask me, I assume you’re looking for more than what a quick online search would tell you.”

In fact, an online search would have given Sara exactly what she was looking for, but she didn’t want to annoy Elena. So she rephrased her question: “I’m interested in the risks and benefits, both to the User themselves and to their associates.”

“Ah, interesting. I’ll start with the benefits to the User.” Elena happily launched into her explanation.

Although being an Old Domain User came with a wide range of advantages, the greatest was the ability to access the Old Domain—an Old World information network which still preserved vast quantities of data.

The value of the wisdom stored in the Old Domain was incalculable, but it was difficult to even connect to the network using existing technology. Generally speaking, access was possible only by means of special terminals unearthed in ruins. Old Domain Users, however, could use the network without any mechanical assistance. Despite the best efforts of corporate researchers, the way Users gained access remained an enigma.

Transmissions via the Old Domain also seemed totally impervious to the jamming effects of the colorless fog.

"Is that really such a big deal?" Sara interjected, perplexed.

"It's *incredible*," Elena replied, shocked at her partner's obtuseness. "The density of the fog varies, but it covers the whole East all the time. Long-distance transmissions between cities only work because they use the Old Domain."

While no one knew what caused the colorless fog, they did know that the Eastern phenomenon obstructed wireless transmissions—and even light and sound. In extremely high concentrations, it limited clear visibility to little more than ten meters and produced a silence that swallowed up the most raucous clamor. Even wired communications suffered.

But the Old Domain, built with the marvelous technology of a lost age, seemed impervious to the fog's effects. At the very least, transmission over this Old World network had been confirmed to function perfectly in situations where current communications technology failed.

"Even the messages you send with your terminal?" Sara asked, looking confused. "I thought those stopped working when the colorless fog gets bad."

"Those operate on a different system. Short-range transmissions like that use the city as a relay, so they don't work in the fog," Elena explained. As the team's information specialist, she'd struggled with the fog more times than she cared to remember, and her tone grew wistful. "Can you imagine how useful fog-proof communications for data terminals would be? It would make exploring ruins that are always fogged over *so* much easier."

The Old Domain networks linked numerous ruins, including still-functional facilities; here could be found the databases that housed the advanced technical knowledge of the Old World. If someone could successfully obtain that priceless data, and recreate the technology it described, they could in theory bring incredible prosperity to the whole

human race.

When, as happened on occasion, a hunter exploring a ruin died suddenly and with no external injuries, it was generally assumed that they had unwittingly accessed the Old Domain. Those who, for whatever reason, became Users without realizing it could find themselves overwhelmed by uncontrolled surges of information from the ruins. Brain death was the result.

"It can kill you just like that?" Sara interrupted, starting to get agitated. "Are we at risk too?"

"There's almost no chance of that happening just from visiting ruins," Elena reassured her. "Especially not compared to the odds of dying from a monster attack. Who would go to the ruins if people dropped dead like that all the time?"

"Well, you have a point."

"And I've also heard of Old Domain Users being able to locate and map out ruins using Old World networks. According to rumor, some corporations are so desperate to track down Users that they abduct surveyors who sell exceptionally detailed maps. So, I don't think even Users run much risk of dying from information overload." Elena laughed. "Unless you're literally too unlucky to live, of course."

"Oh, yeah. That makes sense," Sara said, looking relieved. But then her face fell. "Still, it sounds like being an Old Domain User has its downsides."

"More like its upsides are so good that everyone wants a piece of them. Of course, when a User falls into the clutches of a governing corporation, they probably end up with a pretty nice life—at the cost of their freedom."

"And what if someone else snaps them up?"

"Well, your average underground operators would probably put them through hell. Of course, some major corporation might catch wind of the situation and send in a strike force to 'rescue' them."

Elena was delighted, albeit surprised, that Sara was taking an interest in her field of expertise. She was happy to keep talking, and her partner got to know a lot about Old Domain Users—including how difficult it would be to earn one's trust. Sara wondered briefly whether she really ought to ask Akira when he woke up.

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Sara's unexpected question—"You were the one who bailed us out in the Kuzusuhara Town Ruins, weren't you?"—left Akira rooted to the spot.

Once he recovered from his shock, he cradled his head in his hands—the cat was out of the bag. Not that he was really all that worried. As far as he was concerned, he was only hiding his involvement from Elena and Sara because his motives and methods would be difficult to explain.

Akira had no idea that he was an Old Domain User—he didn't even know the term. All he knew was that only a handful of people could perceive Alpha, and he was one of them.

How could he explain what he'd done without revealing the secret of Alpha? He was just starting to worry when he noticed Sara looking at him so intently that he stopped thinking and said nothing.

Sara mistook his silence for distrust and sought to dispel it with a sincere look. "I'm sure you have a lot on your plate, so I won't pry," she said. "I just want to know if you're the person who helped us. I won't ask why or how you did it, and I definitely won't tell anyone else what you tell me."

Akira felt overwhelmed. His silence and rigid expression masked panic, but Sara interpreted them as a sign of rejection.

"If you really don't want to tell me, I'll give up for good," she continued, earnestly and a little sadly. "But let me ask you one last time: You were the one who bailed us out in the Kuzusuhara Town Ruins, weren't you?"

Akira owed Sara his life, and here she was practically pleading with him. Sensing her desperation, he gave in and admitted, "Yes, it was me."

The tension in the room vanished. Sara's expression softened, while Akira looked apologetic.

"Sorry I kept quiet about it," he said. "It's, um, kind of hard to explain."

"Don't be. And like I promised, I won't pry. More importantly"—Sara shook her head slightly, then gripped Akira's hand and smiled—"thank you so, *so* much for rescuing Elena and me. There—I finally got to tell you how grateful I am." Guiltily, she added, "Sorry I was so pushy. Not being able to thank the person who saved my life was really bugging me." She sighed. "Though I guess that's my problem. I should've been more considerate."

"Please, don't sweat it. I owe you my life too," the flustered Akira

replied. “We both got lucky. Let’s leave it at that.”

“You think so? Well, if that’s how you want it, I won’t argue. And thanks—I mean it.” Sara grinned, her mind finally at ease.

“You’re welcome.” Akira returned her smile, but his face showed the faintest hint of gloom—too slight for Sara to detect. When he heard her words of gratitude, he felt something pierce his innermost heart, but he resisted the pain, desperate to keep his anguish from showing.

◆

Akira’s stomach, which had remained empty through his days of sleep, marked the end of the discussion with a growl. Sara laughed at the sound and suggested a meal, and Akira could not turn down the invitation, especially from someone he owed so much to.

Sara told Akira to wait at the table, and less than thirty minutes later, she set down a beautiful plate in front of him. The food heaped on it was obviously a cut above the frozen meals that he’d been surviving on recently. He thought that he recognized some of the noises he’d heard while waiting, but any curiosity he might have had about her cooking vanished as soon as she placed the dish in front of him. As it turned out, the meal tasted every bit as good as it looked.

They sat across from each other and chatted amiably as they ate. At one point, Sara turned the conversation to the time that Akira had rescued them, including the surprisingly high profit that she and Elena had gotten from selling their attackers’ belongings. Since money stored in bank accounts was prone to legal seizure by debt collectors or other claimants, some hunters who operated out of hotels or otherwise lacked a fixed address carried their whole fortunes on their persons at all times. The men who had attacked Elena and Sara had done so too.

The unexpected windfall had almost completely solved the pair’s financial difficulties. New equipment led to more successful hunts, which resulted in increased earnings, which allowed them to purchase even better gear. Thanks to this upward spiral, they had put their slump behind them and were now bringing in even more money than they had before.

Once Sara finished her explanation—punctuated with further expressions of gratitude—she offered to pay Akira a sum equal to what she

and Elena had made on the sale, but he declined.

"Are you sure?" she asked, incredulous. "You were the one who took them out, and it's an awful lot of money."

"I'm sure," he replied. "I left their stuff on them, so I'm not going to make a fuss about it now."

"Hm, well, that kind of puts me in a bind. I don't like being unable to repay you after you saved our lives and even got us back on track financially." Sara groaned. Akira didn't seem likely to accept her money, and forcing a gift on him would be missing the point. Even so, she wanted to do something for him.

"In that case, consider it an advance payment for saving me when you answered that emergency listing," Akira suggested. "Of course, I don't know the going rate, so I've got no idea if that would cover it."

"I don't know—I mean, like I said earlier, we weren't planning on asking you to pay."

"I don't like doing nothing for you and Elena either. You've done so much for me too. Please, let them cancel out."

"I can't argue with that," Sara admitted. "All right."

And just like that, as they exchanged awkward smiles, their debts were settled.

Sara next related how Elena had forced her to stock up on nanomachines as soon as they'd had money to spend. This naturally led to the subject of nanomachine augmentation in general.

"So, a lot of people with nanomachine augmentation store a backup supply in part of their body. I keep mine in my chest," Sara explained, pointing to her breasts, which brimmed with nanomachines and sex appeal. "Some people prefer an external cartridge, but I avoid those because, hey, what if you lose them? There are also ways of distributing nanomachines throughout your whole body, but they'll only get you so far. In most cases, burning through nanomachines affects our figures, and that means big changes in clothing size. So, cut me some slack if I don't look exactly decent."

Sara's outfit left little to the imagination. Her underwear had a lot of adjustable straps and ties, which allowed her to easily adjust its size; her baggy shirt displayed her cleavage. Both were sized to fit her largest possible measurements; at the moment, they hung so loosely that every

movement revealed more glimpses of skin. She felt so comfortable in this attire, and was so unguarded around Akira, that she didn't think twice about being dressed this way around him. Not that she had to worry about men feeling her up, as any creep who got too handsy around her quickly discovered her enhanced strength. It had happened before.

"No, I don't really mind," Akira mumbled. He did his best to look composed in front of such an enticing woman, but Sara still picked up on his darting glances.

"If you're interested, I suppose I could give you a peek," she said invitingly. "I do owe you."

"Please, no more teasing," Akira begged. Sara laughed when she saw him blush.

You never act that way with me, Alpha grumbled, displeased. *I know I've got a better figure, so what gives? Is it because she's not* technically *naked? Is that your kink?*

Shut up, Akira snapped, taking care not to alter his expression.

"If your body changes that much, what do you do for combat gear when you're out in the wasteland?" he asked out loud, hoping to change the subject. "Don't a lot of those suits need individualized tuning? Do you adjust yours every time you go out?"

"I wear the most elastic, flexible body armor I can get, and then put on extra protection and other gear over that," Sara replied. "Your clothes are, um, technically body armor, I guess?"

"Technically, yeah." Akira explained how he had gotten his outfit from Shizuka. As he did so, he subtly steered the topic of conversation to the qualities of body armor, and then why they wore it.

Generally speaking, the farther east one went, the more powerful the monsters one encountered. Those roaming the Front Line were almost impossible to engage with anything short of a tank or a mech, while a handgun was enough to dispatch most monsters on the western frontier. But both sides of the East were home to a great diversity of creatures—including threats that seemed like someone's poor excuse for a joke.

"Robots like fuel tanks with legs?" Akira repeated, only half believing Sara's description. "Do those really exist? And do they even count as monsters?"

"You bet they do," Sara replied. "They'll run up to any person or vehicle that gets too close and detonate their tanks of flammable liquid fuel. I used to hunt them all the time; if you take them out without blowing them up, that fuel sells for a decent price." Her fond reminiscences yielded vivid descriptions that surprised Akira.

"I wonder where something like that came from," he mused.

"Someone told me that some Old World factory gone haywire makes them. Supposedly, they run up to cars to try and refuel them."

"Why do they attack people, then?"

"A bug in their programming, I guess. They might not even mean it as an attack. I heard of one hunter who ran out of fuel and got stranded in the middle of the desert. As the story goes, some of those things ran up, refueled the car, and left without any trouble, so the hunter made it back safe and sound. Not sure how much of that I believe, though."

They kept chatting for quite a while. The rookie hunter listened eagerly to the veteran's somewhat rambling accounts of her experiences, and both

thoroughly enjoyed themselves.

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"Thank you for everything," Akira said, bowing to Sara in the entryway. He was ready to depart. "Goodbye. I'll be going now."

"You just got back on your feet, so be careful," Sara cautioned.

"I will."

Sara hesitated for a moment, then asked the departing boy, "Um, Akira, do you mind if I tell Elena about today? I'll make sure she keeps it to herself, obviously."

"I don't mind, as long as you don't spread it around too much. Shizuka already knows, anyway."

"I knew it," Sara muttered, grimacing.

"She kind of tricked me into telling her," Akira admitted, matching her reaction.

"Did she, now? A word of advice: Shizuka has great instincts, including when it comes to gear. So if you're ever debating what to buy, go with her recommendations."

"I'll do that. Thank you, Sara. Please thank Elena for me too." Akira bowed slightly and left the hunters' home.

Back in his hotel room, Akira looked a little dejected. Eating and talking with Sara had felt rather exciting; returning to the closest thing he had to a home calmed him down. As he settled in, he became aware of the emotions he'd been suppressing—a complex blend of guilt and obligation.

Are you all right? Alpha asked, looking concerned.

Akira didn't respond at once. When he did, his muttered "Yeah" was thoroughly unconvincing.

There's no point trying to keep secrets from me, you know, Alpha responded in a firmer tone. *I'm always with you, and I* will *find out.* Tenderly, she continued, *So don't hold it in. Tell me what's on your mind, and you'll feel a lot better. I doubt keeping it to yourself is in your best interests.*

Akira stared at Alpha's gentle smile in silence. At last, he murmured, "I didn't know how bad being thanked can feel."

He hadn't cared about rescuing Elena and Sara—he had merely used them as an excuse to murder their attackers. Then the pair had saved his life and had shown their deep gratitude to him for saving theirs. Undeserved thanks, coming from the rescuers he had used as a pretext, tormented him with guilt and a sense of his own indebtedness.

Alpha pondered this. She knew that Akira judged the world by some internal standard, but what that standard was still baffled her. But it was at least clear that he viewed this latest development not as a cancellation of debts but as a cause for depression—a point of view she found inscrutable. Yet she had to make sense of his standards if she hoped to grasp what made him tick. That, she believed, was the key to guiding and controlling the boy more effectively. No one was more invested than Alpha was in understanding Akira—a goal she pursued for her own sake, first and foremost.

Nevertheless, she set the question aside for the present.

I see, she said gently. *In that case, save them for real next time. I'd say that's the best solution.*

"You think so?" Akira replied.

I do. That would cancel out this rescue in your mind, right? You'll feel better, and they'll get out of a jam. I don't see any problems. Do you?

Akira thought it over for a few moments. Then, he grinned.

"I guess not. You've got it all figured out," he said, nodding emphatically, as if to convince himself. "Thanks. I feel a lot better now."

I'm glad to hear it, Alpha replied. *In that case, you'd better make sure you're capable enough to help those two when the opportunity presents itself. I hope you understand that, Akira.*

"Yeah, I do."

That's the spirit. Don't worry—I'll train you harder and harder and have you on their level in no time. Just keep putting in the work.

"O-Of course." Akira was in earnest, but he couldn't suppress a tinge of dread when he saw Alpha's determined grin. She, meanwhile, was pleased to see his renewed resolve.

Then a thought struck Akira.

"Alpha," he asked, "am I forgetting something?"

Your gratitude for my unflagging support?

"Thanks. Now, have you got any ideas?"

Now that you mention it, I wonder what happened to Sheryl, Alpha mused. *You promised to drop by her base, but that was three days ago.*

"Agh!"

Not long ago, a girl named Sheryl had approached Akira with an offer. She was a survivor of a slum gang that Akira had shattered in vengeance, and to protect herself she had sought to make Akira the new boss of the surviving gang members. At Alpha's recommendation, Akira had accepted her deal, but only in part—Sheryl would lead the gang, while Akira would lend her his backing.

And Sheryl had asked—no, *begged* Akira to visit her base. He had promised to put in an appearance, at least, but the time of their appointment had long since come and gone. That wasn't his fault, he told himself. He'd had his hands full. But now he decided to set out for Sheryl's headquarters. Better late than never.

Chapter 16: A Hunter's Patronage

Sheryl had set up the headquarters for her new gang in the building that had once been Syberg's base in the slums. Like Sheryl, the gang's members were children who had served under the ex-hunter, and they had already returned to their old routines. Now they could be seen scouring their turf and the nearby desert in search of scrap metal and anything else of value, or heading out in a group to collect their food rations.

Other gangs had begun to sit up and take notice that they were back in business. Surprisingly, the rival groups hadn't yet tried harassing the feeble, newly revived gang. The children under Sheryl's command chalked their evident security up to Akira's support.

As slum kids, they weren't exactly dressed to the nines. Sheryl stood out among them, having acquired nicer clothes while under Syberg's patronage. Life in the alleys had left her attire somewhat worse for wear, but after she gave it a thorough cleaning at the base, it looked good enough to serve as a sign that she was in charge.

With fine clothes and fine appearance, Sheryl looked the part of a gang leader when she barked orders at her underlings. At present, however, she was starting to come off as all bark and no bite. On the surface, she seemed irritated, and the more she tried to suppress her irritation the worse it grew. But a more perceptive observer would have noticed she was starting to panic. Sheryl knew it, and tried to mask her trepidation with a facade of annoyance.

When Syberg was still in charge, Sheryl had had a peer named Erio, a strong, well-built boy around Akira's age. In theory, they had been equals in the gang's hierarchy, although Syberg had given an unofficial preference to Sheryl. But now that Sheryl was in charge, Erio found himself inarguably below her in the pecking order. He wasn't happy about that, but he was willing to put up with it—as long as she had Akira on her side.

And since Akira wasn't around, Erio was starting to grow suspicious. "Sheryl, what happened to that hunter?" he asked. "I haven't seen him."

“I already told you to shut up and wait for him,” Sheryl snapped, faking annoyance.

“But you’ve been saying to expect him any time for days now. Are you sure he’s really—?”

“Shut your mouth! I’m the boss here, and you’ll do what I say!” Sheryl screamed, harsher than she’d intended. She’d only meant to distract Erio, not explode at him.

Her outburst stunned Erio into silence. Then he sighed and muttered, “Whatever you say, Boss.” He had agreed to work for Sheryl when he’d joined her gang, so he asked no more questions. But the look on his face made it clear that he was still dissatisfied.

Sheryl exhaled deeply and tried to rattle off a convincing excuse. “Akira’s hunting keeps him busy, and we’ll have to wait a bit until he can stop by. I worked out a deal with him, but that doesn’t mean I can order him to come running whenever I want. I shouldn’t have to tell you that.”

“I suppose that makes sense. I’m sorry.”

“If you’re done asking questions, get back to work.”

“Yes, Boss.”

Despite his sarcastic tone, Erio obediently withdrew. On his way out, however, he muttered, “Aren’t you supposed to be Akira’s ‘favorite’?”

Sheryl’s mask of irritation slipped when she heard that, though only for a moment. But once she was certain that no one was watching, she allowed herself a look of desperate anxiety.

I can’t keep this up! What am I supposed to do? Should I go looking for Akira again?

After a moment’s consideration, she realized that she was only trying to avoid facing her fears.

No, she decided, shaking her head. *The others will only get more suspicious if I keep doing that.*

On the day that Akira had promised to visit her base, Sheryl had gathered her whole gang to wait for him. But the hunter hadn’t come that day, or the next, or even the next. Her whole enterprise was built on his support, so when he failed to materialize, her underlings naturally started to worry, jeopardizing her position. She could only maintain an even keel, feeding excuses to her gang, for so long. Her outer calm was beginning to crack, revealing her impatience.

Those who picked up on her uneasiness eyed her with growing suspicion. Behind her back, the other children began to air their doubts: Sheryl was lying, or Akira had only led her on, or he had already abandoned her. She saw the unspoken distrust in their eyes and knew that it was only a matter of time until one of them openly opposed her, but her hands were tied. She had no way to send a message to Akira, and she hadn't spotted him near his hotel either. With no way out, the anxiety was becoming more than she could bear.

And then, at that last possible moment, Akira arrived.

"Is Sheryl here? Oh, never mind. I see her."

"Akira!" Sheryl cried, louder than she intended. In fact, she was so relieved that her voice could be heard in the farthest corners of the base. Children rushed from other rooms to see what the fuss was about.

When a stunned Sheryl came to her senses again, she grabbed Akira by the hand, dragged him into her private room, and shut the door behind them. Then she struggled to master her jumbled emotions. Part of her wanted to give into anger and demand why he had broken his promise, while her more reasonable side warned her in no uncertain terms that upsetting him would be the last mistake she would ever make.

"Thank you so much for stopping by today," she said at last, smiling. "I've been waiting for you. But, um, I thought that we'd agreed to meet here a few evenings ago. Did something come up?" Her expression suggested that she really didn't mind his tardiness—or at least she hoped it did.

"Sorry," Akira said casually. "I meant to come, but then I almost died."

"You almost *what*?!" Sheryl shouted, losing her cool in spite of herself.

Akira didn't know what to make of her reaction, but he doubled down: "I'm a hunter. These things happen."

Sheryl was at a loss. She had assumed that he had *some* reason for his absence, but a brush with death was outside all her expectations. Shock gave way to genuine concern, and she demanded, "A-Are you all right?!"

"Yeah. I'm all healed up, and I feel fine."

"I...I see. Er, would you mind telling me what happened?"

"I got swarmed by monsters twice in one day," Akira calmly explained. "Between exhaustion and the other stuff I had to deal with after the fight, I ended up being late. Sorry." He told himself that he didn't need to mention

that he had completely forgotten their agreement.

Sheryl let out a sigh of relief—and other feelings. Then she pulled herself together and flashed a winning smile.

"That must have been awful," she said. "I'm just glad that you made it back safely. Now, I brought you to my room so that we could chat briefly in private, but I'd still like to introduce you to everyone. They've been eager to meet you. Do you mind?"

"Not at all."

Don't scare me like that, damn it, Sheryl mentally griped as she led Akira out of the room. *I'm sure he's just playing up the danger to make himself look good, but I wish he wouldn't joke about things like that.*

Her position depended on the hunter's patronage, and any hint of a threat to it got on her nerves. But she was in no position to complain, and she didn't want to risk offending him, so she decided to play along with his tall tale for the time being. She did, however, pull a face when he wasn't looking.

Akira had answered her questions so matter-of-factly that it never crossed her mind that he might have been telling the truth.

Sheryl immediately assembled her gang in the largest room of their base. The sight of her smiling by Akira's side provoked quite the buzz among the children.

"He really showed up! I had a hard time believing it, but looks like I was wrong."

"*That's* the hunter who killed Syberg? He's just a kid like us."

"Thank goodness. I'm so relieved she was right."

"I'm worried. You said you worked out a deal with him, but how much is he really going to be able to help us?"

"Hey, are you sure this is gonna work? He doesn't look all that tough."

Not all the responses were positive, but at least no one doubted that Akira was on their side anymore.

"This is Akira," Sheryl announced confidently. "You probably know him as the guy who took out Syberg and his cronies when they ambushed him. Akira is still willing to help us out after all that, so I want you all on your best behavior."

"I'm Akira," the hunter said, prompted by a look from Sheryl. He didn't

exactly sound thrilled to be introducing himself. “I’m only going to work with Sheryl on a personal level, and I don’t plan on joining your gang. She’s the boss, so take any questions to her. Don’t bug me for any info you don’t need to know, and don’t ask me questions I tell you not to ask. That’s all I’ve got to say.”

A perplexed murmur ran through the group of children. They had assumed that Sheryl would be their leader in name only while they all effectively answered to Akira in exchange for his support. Yet the hunter seemed truly and bafflingly uninterested in their gang. Even Sheryl winced a bit, but Akira took no notice.

“Sheryl, come with me for a sec,” he said. “I need you for something.”

“What? Oh, okay, sure.”

But just as Akira turned to leave with Sheryl in tow, Erio snapped back to his senses.

“H-Hang on! Are you really Akira?!” the boy shouted.

Akira stopped and turned with a disgruntled “Yeah.”

“What the hell have you been ignoring us for all this time?! And what do you mean you’re not gonna join our gang?! Aren’t you gonna look out for us?!”

“I just told you to ask Sheryl those things. Quit bothering me.”

For Erio, Akira’s annoyed attitude was the last straw. When the boy had heard that Syberg’s killer was on their side, he’d felt both relieved and anxious by turns. When the hunter failed to show up, Erio had been dissatisfied and had begun growing suspicious. And when Akira finally did arrive, he just looked like a normal kid with a big gun. After that letdown, so far as Erio was concerned, Akira’s attitude just added insult to injury.

Can we really trust this kid with our lives? the boy wondered. *I bet even I could take him on.*

For all their faults, Syberg and his fellow ex-hunters had been competent enough. They’d ruled through sheer force so effectively that the gang had practically vanished when they did. Erio didn’t believe for a moment that the scrawny kid in front of him could fill the power vacuum.

Did Sheryl trick us? Or maybe he’s tricking her.

Suddenly Erio found himself envisioning how easy it would be to unmask Akira as a weakling—all he had to do was knock him down and take his gun. As Akira turned away and made for the exit, apparently

disinterested, he seemed to be mocking Erio—and his back looked vulnerable. Since the collapse of Syberg's gang, Erio had been grasping for anything that would give his life a sense of stability again, including the promise of Sheryl's new group; now he felt that promise to be empty, and his sense of betrayal drove him over the edge.

"Heads up!" Erio shouted, lunging forward. Akira's unguarded back was only a few steps away, and Erio only needed a moment to punch his head. Yet to Erio's astonishment, Akira dodged the blow without even looking.

"What the—?"

And Akira slugged the shocked Erio in the face, slamming the bigger boy to the floor.

Akira no longer had anything to fear from untrained assailants. Between Alpha's training and his experience in combat, he'd come so far that nothing short of an ambush would give a normal opponent a chance against him. And since life in the back alleys had taught him to stay on guard, even a surprise attack would be unlikely to succeed—and that was before you factored in Alpha. Not even an elite veteran could get the drop on her. As Erio had prepared to strike, she was already warning Akira in detail, allowing him to evade without even turning around. Erio never stood a chance.

So now the larger boy lay on the ground, clutching a hand to his face in pain. Looking up at Akira, annoyed, he found himself staring down the barrel of the hunter's sidearm. Terror seized Erio, while the children near him scrambled out of the way. Without batting an eye, Akira pulled the trigger.

Erio lay as still as a corpse next to the new hole in the floor. Akira had shot wide on purpose, and Erio was unharmed—at least physically. But his face was the picture of fear, and Sheryl and the other children couldn't utter a sound.

“Sheryl, I don’t care who you let into your gang, and it’s none of my business,” Akira said bitterly. “But you’re in charge, so keep your people in line—*before* I assume that you ordered them to kill me. Let’s go.”

He stepped through the door, and Sheryl hurried after him. Behind them they left a frozen tableau of the felled Erio and a roomful of terrified children.

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Outside the base, Akira led Sheryl on a trek through the slums. He didn’t tell her where they were going, and she was too busy mentally cursing Erio to wonder.

What was that dumbass thinking*, picking a fight with a hunter?! Is he crazy, or just suicidal?! And does he have any idea how hard I’ve worked to get on Akira’s good side?! Oh, damn it all! If that brainless shithead has a death wish, I wish he’d leave me out of it!*

All the while, Sheryl struggled to maintain a strained smile; she didn’t want Akira to think she was scowling at *him*. She followed the hunter in silence.

“Was that good enough?” he asked once they had walked some distance.

“Huh?” Sheryl said, too stunned to give any more reply than a questioning look.

Oblivious to Sheryl’s anxiety, Akira assumed she simply didn’t get what he was asking. “That’s what you called me in for, right?” he clarified.

Sheryl finally noticed how calm he was, and realized—to her great relief—that he’d been faking his irritation, at least toward her.

“Yes, I did have something like that in mind, but you might have overdone it just a little,” she said, flashing a grim smile.

“Oh,” Akira responded. “Then I hate to bother you, but would you clean up the mess for me? I don’t like dealing with people problems.”

“Of course, of course. By the way, where are we going now?”

“You’ll see when we get there. Oh, here we are.” Akira pointed to Katsuragi’s massive semitruck, parked in an empty lot.

The merchant and his business partner, Darius, sold primarily to hunters, and their business model relied on having a mobile storefront. They’d just finished hauling a shipment of top-of-the-line gear all the way from the

deadly Front Line, and they had planned on investing their profits in expanding their business. But they'd had to hire guards on the way back, and then pay Elena and Sara for bailing them out in an emergency, leaving them only moderately in the black. And so, despite winning their once-in-a-lifetime gamble, the traders had to keep focusing on reliable deals—which less charitable observers might have called "small-time."

"That you, Akira?" Darius yelled from the shop when the boy arrived with Sheryl in tow. "You all healed up now?"

"Yeah, I'm fit as a fiddle," Akira answered, grinning. "Didn't expect to wake up and find three days had passed, though."

"I'm just glad you're okay," said the merchant, returning his smile. Despite the differences in their ages, jobs, and skills, they shared the easygoing rapport of those who had braved mortal peril side by side.

"Now, what brings you here? If you're a customer, follow me," Darius said, indicating the inside of the trailer with a jerk of his chin.

Akira shook his head. "Nah, I just wanna talk to Katsuragi a bit. Would you call him over for me?"

"Just a sec. Katsuragi! Akira's here! He wants to talk to you!"

Katsuragi emerged from the back of the trailer. "Oh, Akira. And you brought a girlfriend with you. I guess blacking out like that didn't slow you down one bit," he said cheerfully. "So, what do you wanna talk about, and will it turn a profit? I'm too much of a businessman to go in for anything that won't."

"That depends on how good a businessman you are," Akira replied with a taunting grin.

"I'll take that as a 'yes.'" Katsuragi beamed confidently.

◆

Katsuragi looked thoughtful as he mulled over Akira's proposal. The hunter had offered to bring relics into his shop, if the merchant would help out Sheryl's gang in return.

While Akira had been bringing his goods to the exchanges under the Hunter Office's direct management, such businesses were far from the only ones that dealt in relics. Demand for Old World products was high, and even Katsuragi made a lucrative side business of trading them. The

merchant was also well-connected, putting him in a position to do Sheryl's gang a lot of good. At the bottom of society's totem pole, slum dwellers were often forced to sell their finds at rock-bottom prices, and a dealer like Katsuragi could help them just by acting as middleman to ensure that they got their due. And since he already had a good reputation as a trader, he might even be able to secure a minor job or two for the young unknowns.

Katsuragi knew Akira well enough to estimate the probable quantity and quality of his relics. He ran the numbers in his head, subtracted the costs of looking out for Sheryl from the income he'd make selling Akira's finds, and found that the result put him squarely in the black. Even so, he put on a skeptical look as he made his reply.

"I owe you, Akira, and I can turn a profit on relics," he said. "Your offer definitely merits consideration."

"Then we have a deal?"

"Not so fast. I've got a couple questions for you before I make up my mind. First of all, what's she to you?" The merchant directed his appraising eye at Sheryl, who tensed up.

"Why do you wanna know that?" Akira asked, puzzled.

"Why? You're going out of your way to ask me to help her out. Can you blame me if I'm curious? I might end up doing business with her for a long time, depending on how things shake out. So, what is she to you? Acquaintance? Friend? Family? Girlfriend? Mistress?"

"We're just slum kids who happen to know each other," Akira said. "We're friendly enough for me to be here, but I'd cut her loose if she got in my way. That's it."

"Really now?" Katsuragi set that question aside for the moment, hoping to deduce the truth from the hunter's attitude. "Then let me ask about your end of the deal. Just so we're clear, I'm not affiliated with the Hunter Office when it comes to relic sales, so nothing you bring me will boost your hunter rank. Did you consider that?"

It was true that relics only raised a hunter's rank if they were sold through the Hunter Office or one of its affiliates. Some swindlers and corrupt traders dangled promises of speedy promotions as bait to secure finds at cutthroat rates. By the same token, hunters who mistakenly assumed that they were selling to an Office affiliate sometimes turned hostile when they realized their error.

Rank, after all, was a crucial status marker for hunters. And Akira was a good enough hunter—at least in Katsuragi's opinion—that a fight between them would leave the merchant firmly on the losing side. So he thought it in his best interest to make sure they were both on the same page.

"I don't mind, as long as you give me a good price; I want money more than rank right now," Akira said calmly. "If I don't like what you pay me, I'll just go back to selling to the Hunter Office."

"I see." Katsuragi considered a moment longer, then announced, "Right! You've got yourself a deal!"

Katsuragi shook Akira's hand, giving the hunter his best business smile. He then went to do the same with Sheryl, but she hesitated to take his hand.

"What's the matter?" the merchant asked, showing surprise. "We're gonna be working together a lot from now on, so we ought to at least shake on it."

"S-Sorry," Sheryl stammered and quickly seized Katsuragi's hand. The force of his grip startled her, and she glanced at his face in fear.

Katsuragi's eyes weren't smiling anymore.

"Don't stab me in the back," he hissed. His expression, gaze, voice, and grip all implied what would happen otherwise.

Money made people crazy, the merchant knew—and the poorer the person, the less money it took to drive them over the edge. That was why survival and trust were both so cheap in the slums, where people would trample others' lives and their own reputations for the price of a single bullet. So, in Katsuragi's opinion, conducting business in that district required that he start off with a show of intimidation.

But he'd overdone it this time. The arms merchant was used to dealing with hunters who went head-to-head with monsters in the wastes, and the kind of threats needed for his usual clientele were a little too much for an ordinary slum kid. Sheryl trembled, too overwhelmed to speak. Katsuragi realized his error and backed down.

"If she gives you too much trouble, let me know," Akira interjected. "I'll take care of it."

"How far would you be willing to go, exactly?" the merchant inquired.

"I'll dump her lifeless body in the desert."

They didn't think he was joking. Sheryl shuddered, while Katsuragi blurted out, "That's awfully specific."

“The wastelands are brutal, but so are the slums,” Akira explained. “She’s not stupid enough to double-cross you—I think.”

“You *think*?” Katsuragi pressed.

“Nothing’s ever certain. What’re the odds we’d have to fight two packs of monsters in one day?”

“You’ve got that right!” Katsuragi guffawed. He turned back to Sheryl, his smile more pleasant this time. “Sorry I scared you. But you can never be too careful, you know? In any case, I’m looking forward to working with you.”

“L-Likewise,” Sheryl replied, trying to use her usual charm. But after getting threats from both Katsuragi and Akira, her strained expression barely qualified as a smile.

“Oh, by the way, do you sell data terminals?” Akira asked, ignoring Sheryl’s look. “I want something cheap and ready to use; it only has to do the bare minimum.”

“People have different ideas about what constitutes ‘the bare minimum,’” Katsuragi responded.

“It’s so I can keep in touch with Sheryl. She just needs to be able to contact me.”

“That’ll be twenty thousand aurum, then.”

Akira shelled out the required cash, initialized the new terminal by connecting it to his own, and then handed it to Sheryl.

“Use that to call me if something comes up,” he said. “If you can’t reach me for a long time, assume I’m dead. I’ll do the same with you.”

“A-All right,” Sheryl managed to respond. “Thank you so much.”

“Also, I know you asked me to stop by your base regularly, but I don’t want to deal with that right now. I’m usually off doing my own thing, so making a lot of plans would get in my way.”

“I...I see.”

“I don’t mind if you ask me to come over regularly,” Akira added. “I’ll show up if I feel like it and I’ve got the time. Don’t ask me to drop in every day, though. Got it?”

“Y-Yes.”

“Great. I’ve got stuff to do, so I’m heading out now. Sheryl, why don’t you and Katsuragi talk over how he’s gonna help out your gang?”

“Hang on,” Katsuragi called, looking miffed. “How about you buy

something else while you're here?"

"Sorry, but I can't afford it. Maybe next time." And with that, Akira left.

"All right, then," Katsuragi said once the hunter was gone, "let's take Akira's advice and talk business. Are you okay on time?"

"Huh? Oh, yes, I'm fine," Sheryl replied, pulling herself together and giving the merchant a polite bow. "I'd love to talk."

Katsuragi chuckled, giving Sheryl another appraising look. "Now that he's out of the room and we're off to a fresh start, I'll ask you again: what are you to Akira?"

"Just what he told you," Sheryl said timidly.

"I see. Let me rephrase the question—what do you *want* to be to him? Are you angling to become his girlfriend or his mistress or something?"

Sheryl suspected that the wrong answer would get in the way of her deal with the merchant. Cautiously, she asked, "Does that have anything to do with you supporting my gang?"

"You bet it does," Katsuragi said, putting on his business smile again. As far as the trader was concerned, Sheryl was only an extra that came with Akira. But was she an *important* extra? That was what he wanted to know. "I plan to stay on good terms with Akira for a long time, so how long I stick with you depends on your relationship with him. I don't know if you'll get closer to Akira or if he'll end up ditching you, but I at least want to find out if you're in this for the long haul. So, what's your angle? You might have your work cut out for you, considering how prickly he seemed just now."

"Of course I have my heart set on a more intimate relationship," Sheryl said, her smile confident. She knew that she was being tested. "And I'm pretty sure that he likes me. Why else would he do all this to help me out?"

"You think so? He sounded awfully harsh on you to me."

"I think he just wanted to prove that he wasn't letting some gutter girl pull the wool over his eyes. He has his reputation as a hunter to consider."

Sheryl felt her own explanation unconvincing, although she kept up a confident expression. Show any weakness, she figured, and the merchant would write her off.

Katsuragi, however, fixed Sheryl with another searching look and then suddenly began to chuckle. "I'm gonna say you tried to seduce Akira and he turned you down."

Sheryl froze.

“You look like you’re wondering how I knew,” the trader continued with a cocksure grin, though to tell the truth he’d been bluffing in order to gauge Sheryl’s reaction. “Plenty of hunters bring their sweethearts around when they’ve got money to burn. I’d miss out on business if I couldn’t recognize the signs. Once you’ve seen enough couples, it’s easy to tell when a guy’s head over heels for his girl and when he’s thinking about ditching her soon. Guys who are infatuated give me a great chance to sell pricey gear, since they’re looking to show off. The way Akira treated you, on the other hand, reminded me a lot more of the other kind.”

By now, Katsuragi was certain that Akira had rebuffed Sheryl’s advances; her reactions told him that much.

“But them’s the breaks. After all, you’re not exactly—” He broke off and hastened to correct himself. “Oh, don’t get me wrong; I’m not trying to make fun of you. It’s a matter of standards, and Akira’s are probably set pretty high.”

“What do you mean?” Sheryl grimaced in spite of herself. Normally she would have taken a more charming approach, but today she was too rattled for niceties.

“This is only a pet theory of mine,” Katsuragi disclaimed confidently, savoring Sheryl’s anxiety, “but most lady hunters seem to be gorgeous. Or at least the successful ones are; it’s a different story if they’re down and out. Anyway, everyone looks for different things in a woman, but there’s something all their standards have in common, and I think it’s health.”

“Health?” Sheryl repeated, still off-kilter.

“Exactly. Whether we’re talking about smooth skin, glossy hair, or a good figure, healthier people are considered better-looking. And in that sense, at least, every well-off hunter is a beauty. Health problems would slow them down in the ruins, so they have to stay in tip-top shape if they want to make it back alive.”

Katsuragi was right. Physical conditioning was vital to hunting, and successful hunters were less likely to die in part because they could afford to take time off when they weren’t feeling their best.

“And good hunters are always treating their wounds with high-end medicines,” the merchant went on. “That means they’re basically healing themselves at the cellular level day in and day out, including even rough skin.”

Indeed, some beauty products marketed to the wealthy bore striking similarities to expensive recovery capsules. In that sense, successful hunters boasted skin on par with the upper class.

"They don't have to worry about obesity either, since working in the wasteland is basically constant exercise." Even hunters who wore powered suits had to stay in shape; slimming down was easier than getting a suit tailored to an unusually heavyset build. "And some medicines even convert excess body fat into energy to cure fatigue. So hunters can keep themselves looking hot and healthy all the time without even trying. Cellular-level healing doubles as a form of anti-aging, which explains why some hunters look a helluva lot younger than they really are—although I've also heard that the successful ones can splurge a lot more on their looks. Anyway, compared to women like that, you don't quite measure up. And Akira knows some gorgeous hunters too."

Katsuragi was thinking of Elena and Sara. The hunters wouldn't have taken Akira home with them if they weren't on friendly terms. And if the boy spent a lot of time with such knockouts, the trader thought, he might easily have high standards of feminine beauty.

Sheryl listened attentively, although she grew more depressed the more Katsuragi listed the challenges in her way. "Why tell me all this?" she asked, unable to keep a slight quaver out of her voice. "What's the point?"

"To help you understand what I'm about to tell you," Katsuragi said, noting Sheryl's frustration with a smug grin. "Hang on a second; I've got something for you."

With that, the merchant stepped deeper into the trailer, shouting, "Darius! Where'd you put that free sample?!"

"You put it in the back and said you were gonna return it because no one was using it!" Darius hollered back.

"Oh, you're right! Here it is!"

A short while later, Katsuragi returned carrying a large bag, which he set down in front of Sheryl.

"Thanks for waiting," he said. "This is for you. Consider it a gift."

The bag was stuffed with preserved food about to expire, guns that were basically junk, and other salvage that Sheryl and her gang would nonetheless find extremely valuable.

"Th-Thank you very much," she replied, hastily bowing.

“There’s some cosmetics and soaps in here,” the merchant added, pulling a pouch out of the bag. “It’s just a free sample, but we got it from a company that sells medical supplies to hunters, so it should outclass the cheap stuff. If you’re gonna try to charm Akira, use this and look good enough to stay in the running.”

Free sample or not, such beauty products would ordinarily have been out of the reach of a slum kid like Sheryl. So Katsuragi made sure that she knew what they were for and wouldn’t resell them. “Just so we’re clear, this is an investment,” he said. “I don’t know what Akira sees in you, but for now, you’re his reason to sell me relics. Put in the effort to keep him from dumping you and taking his business elsewhere. Is that clear?”

“Y-Yes,” Sheryl replied.

“Then, I hope we’ll be working together for a long time.” Katsuragi’s enterprising grin was laced with something like the familiarity shared by partners in crime.

◆

After leaving Sheryl and Katsuragi, Akira swung by Cartridge Freak to stock up on ammo before returning to his hotel.

Shizuka noticed him as soon as he entered and waved him over, stepping out from behind the counter as she did so. That was odd, and Akira wasn’t sure what to make of her behavior, but he approached her as she wished.

He greeted her with his usual preamble to placing an order. “Shizuka, I’d like some more ammo, please. I used up a lot recently, so I’ll need more than—”

The shopkeeper cut him off as she threw her arms around him and hugged him tight.

“Sh-Shizuka?” Akira was caught off guard. Her warm body and soft breasts distracted him, and he struggled to escape, confused and embarrassed. For her part, she knew how he felt and didn’t care, holding onto him as if she would never let go unless he stopped struggling.

Eventually he gave in and calmed down. Then Shizuka gently said, “Elena and Sara told me that you passed out from an overdose of recovery capsules.”

“Oh, um, you see...” Akira fumbled for an excuse, expecting her to be

upset with him, but she went on.

"Maybe I ought to tell you to stop risking your life! Maybe I should warn you that you'll die if you keep this up! I tell folks this every day. But I won't now, because I've got a hunch you didn't have a choice this time." Shizuka pressed him even more firmly against her. "So let me just say: thank goodness you're all right!"

With that, she released the boy and assumed her usual smile. "Well, danger goes hand in hand with hunting—even I know that. But please, try not to make me worry too much."

Akira stared at the typically cheerful shopkeeper, at a loss for words. Then his face lit up and he bobbed his head to her.

"I'm sorry I worried you. I'm fine now," he said firmly, as if he hadn't just spent several days in a coma.

Shizuka determined, to her relief, that he really was well and not merely forcing himself to appear so. "Then I suppose I should get back to business. Wait just a moment; I'll get what you need."

Akira watched her retreat into the back of the store. Just then, a voice called out to him from behind.

"Akira! I see you're awake." Elena approached and looked the boy up and down with some surprise. "Is it safe for you to be out and about?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," Akira replied.

He spoke steadily, and she felt reassured. "I see. I'm glad," she said. Then she looked a tad annoyed. "Still, I'm surprised to run into you here. I told Sara to contact me when you woke up, but she—" A new message popped up on her data terminal. She read it, smiled wryly, and added, "She just told me—late. Damn it. I just know she forgot."

"Uh, about that..." Akira replied politely. "Sara helped me out a lot when I woke up, so I bet that's why it slipped her mind." He bowed his head to Elena. "I can't thank you both enough for all you've done for me." Then he added, more apologetically, "And I'm sorry for hogging your bed while I was out cold."

"Don't worry about it," Elena reassured him cheerfully. "It's big enough for all three of us, in any case. I'm more worried about the time Sara used you as a body pillow without realizing it. She's stronger than she looks, what with her nanomachines and all. Are you okay? No broken bones or anything?" She laughed, but she still sounded concerned.

“I-I’m fine,” Akira said, chuckling awkwardly. Surely she was joking about him sleeping sandwiched between her and Sara—right? But he didn’t ask her to clarify. Just in case.

◆

With a heavy heart, Sheryl trudged back to her headquarters. She was at her limit, in more ways than one.

First, she had thought that she was going to die because Akira was missing and her gang was growing suspicious. When the hunter had finally arrived, she’d thought she was going to die because one of her underlings had assaulted him. Next, she’d thought she was going to die when Katsuragi had threatened her. And last but not least, she’d thought she was going to die when Akira made it clear that he’d kill her if she tried anything stupid.

And now, when she got back to base, she would need to pretend that everything was going fine, just fine. And then issue orders to ensure that it did. And she would need to go on acting confident and secure, to both her followers and her rivals, until it was no longer an act.

Sheryl was truly at her breaking point.

Darius plodded along beside her, carrying the bag Katsuragi had given her. The firearms that Katsuragi had included made the bag too heavy for Sheryl to move easily, and he’d turn a loss on his investment if someone robbed her of it on her way home. So the merchant had sent Darius to accompany her. When they arrived at her base, the bodyguard set the bag unceremoniously on the ground.

“I’m not going in,” he said. “You can carry it from here.”

“I understand,” Sheryl replied, bowing politely. “Thank you ever so much for escorting me all the way here.” Her manners—polished, at least for a slum kid—left a favorable impression on the trader.

“No sweat. I’m sure you’ve got it rough, but hang in there,” he said in parting.

When Sheryl heaved the weighty bag off the ground and lugged it into her headquarters, she found her entire gang waiting for her. That was only proper, but Sheryl still frowned in annoyance—she had counted on one person being absent.

“You’re still here?” She glared at Erio. “I figured you’d be long gone by now.”

“L-Look, Sheryl, that was my bad, I know,” Erio stammered, hoping to pacify his leader.

“You do, do you?” she snapped. “If you’ve got the brains to work that out, then you’ve got the brains to get lost.”

“H-He just looked like a normal kid,” Erio protested. “He had a gun, sure, but that doesn’t make someone a great hunter. I thought he might be pulling the wool over your eyes, so I—”

“Really? He looked ‘normal’ to you?” For Sheryl, this was the straw that broke the camel’s back. “‘Normal’?!” she screamed, giving full voice to her fury. “He killed three armed ex-hunters without breaking a sweat! Is that your idea of normal?! Then prove it! Get out to the ruins and grab some relics! Take out anyone who tries to rob you on the way back! What are you waiting for?! Get going!”

Sheryl paused, gasping, while Erio froze in terror. The other children watched in silence, cowed.

“Chase that moron out of here!” she bellowed at the group. “Now!”

“H-Hang on!” Erio pleaded.

“Get him out of here! That’s an order! You all agreed that I’m the boss, remember?! If you’re having second thoughts, then get out!”

The children near Erio glanced at each other, then grabbed the boy by his shoulders and hauled him off. Erio hung his head and offered no resistance.

Sheryl slowly steadied her breathing. She knew that she’d lost her cool, and that she needed to regain it. Staying calm prevented blunders, she reminded herself as she took deep gulps of air.

“Sh-Sheryl, about Erio...” The voice belonged to a girl named Aricia, who was quite close with the boy.

Having vented her pent-up frustration and calmed her breathing, Sheryl was somewhat more composed now. She could think rationally once more, but she still gave Aricia a stern look.

“I know,” she said. “But now’s not the time. I can’t leave Erio in the gang. You understand that, right?”

“Y-Yeah, but...” Aricia faltered.

“I can’t,” Sheryl insisted. She knew Aricia cared for Erio, but she forced

the girl to face the facts. “Things will be different once we have so many people that Akira won’t notice Erio in the crowd, but it will take a while for the gang to get that big. Let him go for now.”

“We’re gonna get more people? When we’re this bad off?” a nearby child asked, surprised.

“We are, and as many as we can,” Sheryl declared earnestly. “There’s only so much we can do with so few members, and we need to expand our operations soon if we want to start making money.”

“But is it safe to recruit people when we’re so weak?”

“It doesn’t matter; we’ll still do it. We need to have something to offer Akira as soon as possible, or he’ll dump us.” That silenced them—they knew what losing the hunter’s support would mean. Sheryl spelled it out for them anyway: “Akira isn’t helping us out of the goodness of his heart. And we’d be done for without him. We have to expand, no matter how dangerous it is.” She kept her voice firm to stifle dissent and cement her position at the top of the chain of command. “Akira put me in touch with a man called Katsuragi, who’s going to be giving us some help from now on. So we’ve got a good, solid connection, and I can plan around that. I want you all to work with me.”

She opened the bag, which she’d left on the floor beside her. At the sight of the food and weapons inside, the other children gave a quiet cheer.

“Katsuragi gave us these supplies—again, thanks to Akira—and they should keep us afloat for now. I’m going to divvy all this stuff up”—Sheryl’s voice hardened as her eye fell on several children who were reaching toward the bag—“so if you take anything without my permission, I’ll kill you.”

The children froze and then slowly withdrew their hands.

Sheryl surveyed the gathered kids and let out a deep sigh, imagining how difficult it would be to turn them into a proper gang.

◆

As usual, Elena was fiddling with her head-mounted data terminal as she emerged from the bath, wrapped in a towel.

“I know Akira’s gone now, Elena, but that’s still no excuse to wander around the house looking like that,” Sara grumbled, exasperated that, once

again, her friend hadn't even bothered to put on underwear.

Elena had been more circumspect during Akira's stay, of course. For all that he was a child and in a coma, he was still a male. So she had kept herself fully dressed whenever she was near the bedroom, in case he suddenly woke up. Since his departure, however, she had blithely reverted to her old habits.

"Where's the harm?" she said. "Look at you, always lounging around in your shirt and underwear. Don't tell me you were dressed like that when Akira woke up."

"Yeah. Why?" was Sara's response.

"Are you *kidding* me? At least *try* to show some decorum!"

"Don't worry, he didn't seem to mind."

"That's not the point. What am I going to do with you?" Elena clutched her head in disbelief.

"Oh, what does it matter?" Sara replied, grinning innocently. "Think of it as a little bonus for saving our lives."

Elena gawked at her friend. Sara grew more sober and explained, "Akira was the one who bailed us out that time."

"Oh," Elena responded after letting that sink in for a moment.

"You don't sound too shocked," Sara said. She had been expecting more of a reaction.

"I had my suspicions. Didn't you? I just didn't want to pry, since Akira was hiding it. I doubt he brought it up on his own, so I'm guessing you pushed him to tell you. Did that cause any problems?"

"Not at all. He actually apologized for keeping it secret, even though I basically forced it out of him." Sara sounded remorseful, and her smile was tinged with regret.

"Well, that's, er, not good, but it could have been worse. I hope you apologized for pestering him."

"I said I was sorry."

"I'm glad to hear it. We can't go making trouble for him now that we know that we literally owe him our lives."

"I know." Then Sara fixed Elena with a serious look, determined to extract a promise from her best friend. "I've got a favor to ask you about that. I'm sure you've got a lot of questions for Akira too, but please don't ask him. And don't tell anyone else either. I promised him that we wouldn't,

so please. I mean it. No matter how unhappy it makes you, don't ask him any questions."

"All right, I promise," Elena replied, more easygoing than Sara but still clearly sincere. "I won't stick my nose into Akira's business, and I won't tell anyone, so relax."

"You're sure?" Sara asked, surprised that her friend hadn't put up more of a fight.

Elena grinned. "Like I said, I've had my suspicions—about you as well as Akira. I'm guessing that you asked Shizuka a lot of questions. Well, I did some digging of my own. Don't worry—I'm not going to make trouble for someone who's done so much for us any more than you are."

Sara looked startled for a moment, then chuckled at herself. "Nothing gets past you, huh? Am I that easy to read?"

"Well, you did ask me all those questions about Old Domain Users out of the blue. That's not a smart move if you're trying to keep secrets, you know. Talking like that is bound to raise eyebrows."

Sara reluctantly agreed with Elena's point. After a moment of dejection, however, she recovered, grinned, and said, "I knew that leaving all our negotiations to you was the right call."

"It always is. And I'll have to thank Akira properly the next time I see him." Then suddenly Elena was all mirth. "So, Sara, now that we know who really saved us, tell me how you feel about him not being the heir to some big shot's fortune."

"Mercy!" Sara begged, embarrassed. She wasn't easily rattled, but the reminder of her—in retrospect unrealistic—fantasies struck a nerve.

Elena laughed, glad to see her friend's anxiety vanish without a trace.

Chapter 17: None of Your Business

The same medicine that had sent Akira into a coma also left him in excellent condition. After waking up, he spent a day resting just in case. But then he eagerly headed out to hunt relics in the Kuzusuhara Town Ruins once more, refreshed in both body and mind.

As he made his way back through the once-proud edifices, however, his pace was sluggish, and he occasionally stopped to catch his breath. He shook off the urge to lay down on the spot and trudged onward.

The cause of his weariness? His backpack, as expandable as it was, bulged wider than his shoulders, packed to the brim with relics. His legs strained under the weight. At first he had ignored their protests, but after carrying his burden this far, his fatigue and pain had become too great to ignore.

"Alpha, are you sure this isn't too much?" he grumbled, even willing to forgo some of his income if he could leave a few relics behind. "It's not too late to lighten the load, is it?"

But Alpha would have none of it. *No*, she said sternly. *To be honest, I underestimated your bad luck. Not even I could have foreseen, when we went out for a bit of training in the desert, that you would get attacked by not one but two monster packs in a single day.*

"So what?" Akira asked.

To counter your bad luck, you'll need better gear ASAP, and these relics are going to cover the costs. So suck it up and get moving.

"Do I really have to?" Akira whined.

Alpha mimicked his plaintive tone. *You're not going to ask me to beef up my support so that you won't need new gear, are you? I'm working myself to the bone too, you know.*

"No, no. I would've died ages ago without you, and I appreciate all the stuff you do to help me out. So I believe you. But still..."

Akira couldn't help feeling a little doubt seep in among his gratitude and trust. *I feel like I've run into a lot more dangers since I met Alpha*, he

thought to himself. *Sure, hunting's dangerous work, and I met Alpha right at the outset. But is that all there is to it?*

Honestly, Alpha said, adding a note of exasperation to her voice. *You have a beauty like me taking care of you around the clock, and you're still complaining? I think you're getting greedy.*

"Oh, come on," Akira muttered, tired and annoyed.

At first I thought that you just weren't into that sort of thing, but Shizuka, Elena, and Sara all seem to turn you on. So it's really only that you can't touch me, isn't it?

Akira coughed, startled. Had he given away how attractive he found the women?

Since I can't appeal to your sense of touch, I'll just have to treat your eyes to something better. I suppose you still prefer me naked? Alpha said, deleting her clothing and showing off all of her beautiful skin.

Or would you prefer something more risqué? That really seemed to get you going with Sara, she mused. With that, she donned the skimpiest lingerie imaginable and covered it with an airy see-through garment. Her skin, half-hidden beneath the thin glossy fabric, appeared glamorous and bewitching. Color and texture, light and shadow: every aspect of Alpha's appearance was calculated to enhance her appeal.

But Akira just blushed slightly and sighed.

"Fine, my bad," he said. "I'll shut up and carry it, so change your clothes back."

Akira, there's someone over there, Alpha said suddenly, pointing into the ruins.

Akira sensed no urgency in her tone, so he refused to be distracted. "Fix your clothes first," he insisted before raising his binoculars. "That way?"

He scanned the ruins in the direction that Alpha had indicated and spotted a boy running frantically.

"Do I know that guy from somewhere?" he wondered aloud.

He picked a fight with you in Sheryl's base, and you knocked him down, Alpha volunteered.

"Oh, yeah. That rings a bell..." Akira remembered the scuffle but not his opponent's face. To his relief, the other boy didn't seem to be following him, so he settled down to watch and see what would happen next.

◆

Erio was scrambling to find a way back into Sheryl's gang. Aricia had filled him in on what had happened since he'd been kicked out, including the news that Katsuragi would be supporting the gang. If Erio had regretted his decision before, now he was downright remorseful.

He had no connections that could get him into another gang. His only contacts were his friends in Sheryl's group, and he was desperate to rejoin at any cost. Yet Aricia had asked him to wait. He couldn't return immediately, she had said, but he might still get an opportunity once the gang was large enough. So he lingered in the back alleys, biding his time and hoping for his chance.

But would he survive long enough? Desperate to speed things up if possible, Erio had begged a gun from Aricia and risked a trek into the Kuzusuhara Town Ruins in search of relics.

He had to convince either Akira or Sheryl if he wanted to rejoin the gang. And he wouldn't win them over with just polite words and promises. What better way to sweeten the deal than with a relic fresh from the ruins? As far as Erio could see, that ought to satisfy both the hunter's professional interest in Old World artifacts, and the boss's impossible demand that he fetch one.

Many slum dwellers dreamed of stumbling on some relic that would make them rich overnight, but Erio knew that such fantasies almost never came true. Nevertheless, hadn't another slum boy turned hunter pretty much done exactly that? Erio wouldn't count on scaling the ladder of success to the same heights, but why couldn't he at least grasp the bottom rung?

But Erio had quickly lost his wager. Not long after entering the ruins, he had run up against a monster. The beast resembled a dog, and not an especially large one, although its oversized muscles made it seem more imposing. But it wasn't like any of the dogs Erio was familiar with—its four legs bent like an insect's or a reptile's.

The bizarre killer let out a yip of delight when it spotted prey—namely Erio. The boy shot at the creature, but he was no marksman, and being in a panic didn't help. He burned through his meager ammo without landing a shot, tossed the bulky gun aside, and ran for his life. But he couldn't shake his pursuer among the ubiquitous piles of debris, which impeded his human

feet far more than the sprinting monster's. It was only a matter of time before the ravenous beast overtook the boy.

◆

"Sure was rash of him to come out here unarmed," Akira said as he watched Erio, bemused.

Yes, just like you did once upon a time, Alpha gibed, grinning.

Akira grimaced. His own first run-in with the weapon dogs, he felt, might have been even more foolhardy than the scene unfolding before him.

"Well, you're not wrong," he said. "I know I was reckless back then. Still, I wouldn't have met you otherwise, so it all worked out."

True, although I doubt that boy will be so lucky. Maybe that's the only difference between the two of you.

Alpha just meant that Akira was fortunate to have met her. But Akira's expression grew sober; he identified with Erio on a deeper level. Through his binoculars, he saw all too clearly what would have become of him without Alpha. Erio had about ten seconds before the monster caught him, maybe a few more before his coup de grâce. That would be the end of Erio's life—the life of an Akira who might have been.

"You're right. I guess he *is* me," Akira murmured, raising his rifle.

You're going to save him? Alpha asked, looking surprised.

"Yeah. Fate threw us together, so I'll bail him out and boost my luck." Akira grinned and took aim. "Plus, he picked the perfect time to show up."

He pulled the trigger.

◆

Erio kept ahead of the monster for a while—his endurance and reflexes were downright praiseworthy—but at last it cornered him against a blockade of rubble. Panicked, he looked back and saw the creature slowly closing in on him, drool slathered over its fangs and jaws. Sensing the end approaching, Erio's face twisted in fear as he watched his death stalk toward him.

Then, just as it prepared to pounce, the beast suddenly toppled. Dozens of holes ripped open its sturdy muscles; the air filled with the sound of

bullets cracking against the piled-up wreckage. Blood sprayed into the air; it dripped and gushed from wounds. The ground soaked up the red dye. But the brute still lived, writhing and stumbling even as it rose again—only for more shots to slam its body back into the pool of its own blood. A final burst followed—the shooter left nothing to chance. The crimson-stained body shook with the impacts and then lay still. It would not move again.

Erio was stunned. When he recovered from his confusion and finally realized that he had been rescued, relief spread across his face.

"I'm saved?" he said, hardly daring to believe it. Then he began to rejoice, "I...I'm saved. I'm saved!" As he caught his breath, he looked toward where the gunshots had come from—where his savior must be.

Instantly, his smile froze. He saw the person he had so recently picked a fight with in Sheryl's base—the person who had shot a hole in the floor right beside him as he lay defeated.

Erio grimaced. Akira waved him over.

Erio trudged through the ruins, his face twisted in agony.

"S-So heavy," he groaned, shouldering Akira's backpack. The hunter had made him carry it in exchange for saving his life. Erio, of course, hadn't gotten a say in the matter. His legs were already exhausted from fleeing, and now his burden threatened to crush him. He forced himself to stagger onward, convinced that if he fell, he would never rise again.

Akira took point. Monsters occasionally crossed their path, but the hunter easily dispatched them. From behind, he seemed to be walking normally, yet he spotted and shot every beast that they encountered before the creatures had a chance to react. Erio watched, mystified.

Was Akira fighting monsters and *hauling this pack before he ran into me? And taking them out this easily?* The boy smiled, laughing at himself. *No wonder he didn't need help to beat Syberg and his cronies. And then of course I had to pick a fight with him. I see why Sheryl blew her top—I was a real moron.*

A bit belatedly, Erio regretted his rash actions and found himself admiring Akira more and more.

◆

Free from his burden, Akira was bringing down monsters quickly and easily. Yet something began to bother him.

Alpha, he asked, as he inspected his latest kill, *has this kind of beast always been around here?*

I certainly haven't seen one before, Alpha replied, looking puzzled herself. *Something must have shaken up the local ecosystem.*

After the attack on Katsuragi's truck, she added, some of the surviving monsters had settled in the area. Moreover, the local creatures had fed on the corpses left over from the fight, and some species that were normally scarce had exploded in population. So the usual ecological balance had been disrupted, and the relative abundance of various species had changed overnight.

Sounds like trouble, Akira said, scowling.

If the altered population distribution causes the threat level in these ruins to spike, you'll have a harder time hunting here at your current skill, even with my support, Alpha added. *At worst, we may need to avoid this place entirely for a while. Grabbing a big haul of relics on this trip was the right call.*

That really *sounds like trouble.* Akira's frown deepened. He knew how dangerous a situation had to be if even Alpha's help couldn't guarantee his survival.

Let's hurry back to the city, just in case, Alpha suggested.

Sure thing.

Akira steeled himself and picked up his pace. Poor Erio trailed desperately behind him.

Back in the city, Akira made straight for Katsuragi's mobile store. Erio stumbled after him on his last legs.

Katsuragi was minding the shop as usual when he spotted them approaching.

"Akira? And you've got a boy with you this time," the merchant said. "I hope you're here to do business today. A hunter like you can't call himself a customer after buying one cheap data terminal."

"I am, although the business is selling relics," Akira replied.

"Oh, you've got relics for me? A customer is always welcome. So, where are they?"

Akira pointed to the backpack that he was making Erio carry.

Katsuragi smiled. “Looks like a big haul,” he remarked, pleased. “Come around back.”

They went behind the truck, and Akira began laying out relics to sell. At first he just fished items out of the backpack at random, until Alpha warned him not to unpack the medicine and other relics that they planned to keep.

What’s wrong with just letting him see them? he asked telepathically.

Better safe than sorry, she replied. *Would you want to deal with him begging you to sell?*

Couldn’t we sell him one pack if the price was right?

No, she said. *That one pack might save your life. Hold on to them all.*

Akira did place a high value on his own life, so after that he unpacked his relics with greater care.

Katsuragi gloated as he surveyed the goods. To a trader like him, hunters were only as valuable as the money they brought him—and based on the quality and quantity of relics on the ground before him, he valued Akira quite highly.

Once the merchant finished his appraisal, he mentally tabulated his offer, taking his future dealings with Akira into account. Then, with his best salesman’s smile, he said, “Let me see. How about, say, five million aurum for the lot?”

Katsuragi’s expression was brimming with professional sincerity. His offer, however, included a barterer’s “tuition fee”—an amount deducted from his real evaluation.

Don’t accept, Alpha said without a moment’s hesitation.

“I see,” Akira brusquely told Katsuragi. “Well, then, I’ll be taking all of this to the Hunter Office.” He started placing the relics back in his pack.

“Hang on! Wait, wait, wait!” Katsuragi yelled frantically. “That was your cue to haggle. Don’t just up and leave on me.”

“Haggle with somebody else. I don’t have time for it,” Akira said, giving the merchant a frosty look. “Just give me your final offer, or I really will take this stuff to a Hunter Office exchange.”

Katsuragi decided that Akira wasn’t bluffing. He reluctantly left off bargaining and admitted the full price that he’d calculated. “Fine! Eight million aurum! How’s that sound?!”

Well, it’s not bad, Alpha commented.

“All right,” Akira said. “Next time, start with your real offer.”

“Great! You’ve got a deal,” the merchant replied.

Katsuragi and Darius began moving the relics into the trailer. They would resell Akira’s finds for a much higher price than they had paid. But no one would complain—that amount included the appraisal, quality assurance, and other value added by the merchants’ endeavors.

“How do you want your payment?” Katsuragi asked, cheerful in the aftermath of a good deal. “Cash? A deposit would be easier for me, though.”

Akira didn’t have a bank account. When he had lived in the slums, he had never needed one and couldn’t have opened one if he had wanted to. But now, as a hunter, he only needed to go through the proper procedures with the Hunter Office—he just hadn’t thought of doing so yet.

“Some people only take cash,” he said, dodging the question. “Don’t worry, I’ll figure something else out before we start tacking more digits onto the payment figures.”

Katsuragi glanced at Erio. It made sense to him that cash would be more convenient for dealings with Sheryl and her gang.

“Cash it is, then,” he said. “Wait a sec.”

Katsuragi retreated into his truck and returned with eight million aurum in bills. The roll of currency startled Erio out of his exhaustion and held his gaze. But Akira (at Alpha’s instruction) was careful to keep his expression neutral as he accepted his payment and casually stowed it in his backpack. Watching merchant and hunter handle that much money so casually, Erio thought that he saw the insurmountable gulf that separated him from them. To the children of the slums, eight million aurum was a fortune. To Akira and Katsuragi, it wasn’t even a remarkable sum, much less a staggering one.

Akira noticed the conflicted look that Erio was giving him, but he couldn’t tell what was on the boy’s mind. He assumed that Erio was just wondering if he was allowed leave yet, if he got a cut, and if it was even safe to ask.

“We’re done here, so feel free to go,” Akira told him nonchalantly. “No transport fee, since I saved your life. See you.”

As Akira shouldered his backpack to leave, Erio realized that this was his only chance to negotiate directly with the hunter. But he had to get

straight to the point, or Akira might think he was begging for money.

"Would you ask Sheryl to let me back in the gang?!" he called frantically. "She kicked me out after what happened the other day! You saved my life today, but I won't be able to last long on my own! Please! I lugged that heavy bag all the way here, so you know I can make myself useful!"

Akira responded with a deadpan stare. Internally, he was struggling to appear calm over all the money that he had just made, but Erio had no way of knowing that. The boy broke out in a cold sweat, terrified that he might have offended the hunter. If his impulsive request failed, he was done for. Sheryl would never allow him to rejoin her gang if he got himself in Akira's bad books any more than he already was, and he had no faith that he could survive in the alleys indefinitely. And another trip to the ruins was out of the question—he was too demoralized to even consider it. So he prayed fervently that his appeal would be heard.

"Let's swing by Sheryl's place, then," Akira said indifferently. Then, without another word of explanation, he started walking toward the base.

Erio followed, hardly believing his luck. It had worked! Or at least, he hoped it had. Surely Akira wouldn't bring him along just to remind Sheryl to keep disrespectful kids like him out of her gang—would he?

Katsuragi watched them go, rather impressed at how well Akira had the other boy eating out of his hand.

◆

Sheryl's gang was gearing up for what promised to be fairly smooth sailing. The other slum syndicates already acknowledged them as the heirs of Syberg's empire, treating them as a real organization—albeit a weak one—and not just a gaggle of kids. It helped that Sheryl and her subordinates had worked for Syberg, although the support of Syberg's killer counted the most. And with Katsuragi's aid, they had gained both firearms and a revenue stream.

Sheryl's rise threatened to spark a turf war in the slums, so the nearby groups heatedly discussed how to respond to her. Rumors of her good prospects spurred other gangs to begin acknowledging her organization. And a new gang, however small and weak, generally attracted would-be

recruits—those who, for whatever reason, lacked an affiliation or found themselves unwelcome elsewhere. But because the boss, the members, and even the patron of Sheryl's gang were all children, no adults volunteered to join. The result was a rarity in the slums—a syndicate composed entirely of boys and girls. And its ranks soon swelled beyond Sheryl's ability to manage directly. Children flocked to the new group, hoping for better treatment than they were used to receiving elsewhere.

Sheryl appointed Aricia to oversee any recruits whom she couldn't afford to give personal attention to for the time being. Both girls were roughly the same age and had worked together under Syberg. Aricia had an outgoing personality and volunteered for the role, so Sheryl decided to give her a shot.

As the gang's de facto second-in-command, Aricia's duties included relaying any new developments to Sheryl in her room. Her reports doubled as a test of her leadership ability.

"How is cleaning up our turf going?" Sheryl asked. "Was there any friction? I wouldn't be surprised if someone came out to complain, considering how dirty things have gotten."

Slum gangs were implicitly expected to perform one job in particular—garbage collection. Among other things, cleaning up the streets served to show that an area was under the gang's control. Moreover, one man's trash was another man's treasure, and the collected waste belonged, by custom, to the gang whose turf it was found in. Anything that still worked, they used themselves; anything that could be repaired, they fixed or sold to someone who could. Metals they gathered up and sold as scrap. Whatever was left over they dumped in the desert.

"Well..." Aricia hesitated as she recalled what the gang members in charge of cleaning had told her. "A lot of people complained about all the dead bodies, but I think that's it."

"We can't help that," Sheryl replied. "No one's been picking them up lately."

Mugging was common in the slums, and frequently ended in the death of either the victim or the perpetrator—or both. Naturally, their corpses lay where they fell unless someone—namely the local gang—cleared them away. With the collapse of Syberg's organization, his territory had been left ungoverned for a time, and none of the other groups were interested in

cleaning up turf that wasn't theirs. So the dead had piled up.

"Dispose of the bodies just like always," Sheryl instructed, remembering how her old gang had done things. "Take everything they have on them and put it in the storeroom, then dump what's left in the usual spot in the desert. Lend the transporters extra guns."

Lugging bodies out into the wasteland was hard work, and that was before factoring in the risk of monster attacks. Thanks to Katsuragi, Sheryl had been able to arm her workers with a bare minimum of weapons. But they had good reason to go through the trouble of cleaning up the corpses. The city chose to dole out its free rations only in the most sanitary neighborhoods in the slums, and a gang derived a number of benefits from having a distribution center in its territory. Leaving bodies to rot, on the other hand, could render an area so unsanitary that the municipal government opted to incinerate it. The powers that be would have rather reduced the neighborhood and its inhabitants to ashes before the effects of their poor hygiene spread and contaminated the lower district, claiming that the excessive stench might draw monsters to the urban areas. In private, however, many speculated that this was merely a pretext to cull the population of the slums, and that unclean areas offered convenient targets. So the various gangs worked hard to keep their territories relatively sanitary.

Timidly, Aricia ventured, "You know, Sheryl, the gang's grown quite a bit."

"You think so?" Sheryl said. "I don't. We're still too shorthanded to stay on top of the cleanup. But if you mean that our numbers are getting hard to manage, then I agree."

Sheryl had no experience leading a gang. She was slowly adapting to her role, but she was honestly unsure whether she was doing a good job.

"I plan to appoint more managers," she added. "I'm still thinking about who to choose, though. So, I know it's tough, but put up with it for a little bit longer."

She knew that she needed to recruit new members, even if the gang's growing size made it difficult to keep them in line. Numbers were power, and she needed to make her organization stronger if she wanted to provide Akira with benefits any time soon. So expansion was unavoidable.

"I'm doing the best I can," Aricia replied awkwardly. "But I was actually

thinking of, um...”

“What?”

“How many people do you think we need before it will be safe to have Erio around?”

Aricia worried a lot about Erio. She had tried to stop him from trekking into the ruins, but he’d had no other options. Sneaking him one of the gang’s pistols—knowing well that she could be kicked out herself if Sheryl learned of it—had been all that she could do. But she had still taken the risk, hoping against hope that her sweetheart would return alive. Indeed, the only reasons she’d opted to become a manager in the gang were so she could get easier access to a weapon to slip him on the side, and because making herself useful might render Sheryl more pliable.

“No,” Sheryl snapped, shutting down Aricia’s pleading look with an unflinching glare. “We can’t risk it. Akira will be visiting this place a lot; if he spots Erio here again, getting kicked out of the gang will be the least of that guy’s problems. And Akira might not stop with Erio. I shouldn’t have to tell you that.”

“B-But—”

Sheryl cut Aricia’s protest short. “Even if we count on Akira forgetting about Erio, we’ll need to give it at least a month. There’s no way we can bring him back now. The answer is no.”

The girls stared at each other in silence, each refusing to back down.

“If you’re done talking, get back to work,” Sheryl said coldly. “And cool your head while you’re at it.”

Aricia hesitated. “All right.” Her head drooped dejectedly as she left the room.

Sheryl sighed. She was returning to her own work when Aricia barged back in, her face a study in joy and fear.

“Sheryl,” she announced, “Erio’s here!”

“Chase him away,” Sheryl responded icily, glowering at her. “I’ve just about had it, Aricia. You need to give this a rest.”

“B-But Akira is with him.”

Sheryl froze.

◆

The young gang leader hurried to the room where Akira was waiting and paused just outside the door to observe him. To her relief, he did not seem to be in a bad mood.

"Thank you for waiting. I'm so glad that you took the time to visit," she said as she entered the room, smiling at Akira. She ignored Erio, who was standing beside him and watching her uneasily.

"So, um, has Erio been bothering you?" she asked, maintaining her smile while probing for information. "Just so you know, I kicked him out of my gang after last time. So, if anything happened between you two, it's not really our business. Not that I'm trying to make excuses or anything! It's just, uh..."

Akira ignored Sheryl's rambling self-justification and replied, "Yeah, so he tells me. Would you be willing to let him back in? If not, don't sweat it. I won't force you."

"Well, if that's what you want..." Sheryl looked surprised, and her answer was noncommittal. If Akira had simply told her to recruit or expel someone, she would have agreed immediately. She couldn't afford to refuse his requests, however strange, unexpected, or suspect. Compared to keeping Akira happy, all other concerns were trivial.

So any request that might irritate her patron required careful consideration, even if it came from Akira himself. Whatever his reasons, Erio had attacked Akira once already. Could she risk having him around every time the hunter visited?

And what if this was all just some kind of test? Maybe Akira wanted her to reject Erio, even if it seemed like she was refusing the hunter's request. Of course, the reverse was equally conceivable.

"But are you sure?" Sheryl asked. She only sounded mildly surprised, but underneath she was determined to ferret out Akira's wish from his reaction.

Akira, by contrast, was entirely relaxed. "Yeah, he helped me out with a job," he said.

In the few moments afforded to her, Sheryl analyzed his reply as thoroughly as possible and made up her mind.

"I see," she said, trying to put on a friendly smile. "In that case, I'd be glad to."

Erio let out a sigh of relief, and Aricia beamed. Akira, however, looked

stern.

"I'm sure you've got a lot of questions, maybe too many. Erio, don't tell Sheryl more than you have to," he said. "And Sheryl, mind your own business. Understood?"

"Y-Yeah," Erio nodded, though he also winced.

"I understand," Sheryl replied, and she also nodded seriously despite her smile.

Akira briefly returned the gesture. "That's all I came for. Bye."

And with that, he left.

Sheryl saw Akira out of her base with a smile. The instant he vanished from sight, however, she rounded on Erio.

"So, what's going on?" she demanded, scowling.

Erio was about to tell Sheryl the whole story, but he stopped himself and chose his words with care.

"A lot happened, and Akira ended up saving me," he said slowly, making certain not to give too much away. "Then I gave him a hand with something. When we finished, I asked him to put in a word for me with you. That's all."

"He saved you? What fro—?" Sheryl cut her question short when she saw Erio frantically shaking his head.

"Don't ask," he said. "I don't know how many questions Akira thinks are too many. If you insist, I'll tell you the whole story from the beginning, but if Akira finds out, I'll say that you forced me to talk." The boy was acting frightened, a far cry from the time he had lunged at the hunter.

Sheryl looked grave. "Just tell me this: Akira's not angry, is he?"

Erio considered. "I think we're safe. If he wanted me dead, he would've just let me die back there."

Sheryl read between the lines. At the very least, Erio had been in mortal danger, and Akira had helped him out of it. Even if the hunter had only acted on a whim, it seemed safe to assume that he bore Erio hardly any ill will.

"All right then, I'll put you right to work. I want you to talk to everyone and keep an eye on them to make sure no one gets the same dumb ideas you did," she said. His experience would make him a good choice for the role. Even so, she wanted to make herself especially clear. "A lot of us carry

guns now, so if anything like that happens again, it won't end with punching."

"I understand," Erio agreed with a firm nod. "I don't want to get caught in the cross fire any more than you do."

Sheryl was still curious to know what had changed Erio's attitude so utterly, but she held her tongue for the time being. Aricia was happy to have Erio back. Erio seemed unlikely to pull any more brainless stunts, and his experience would help to keep the new recruits in line. And if she stuck her nose where it didn't belong, she decided, she might end up suffering the same experience he had.

◆

Erio was back in the gang, and he wanted to keep it that way. He kept an ear to the ground for news of newcomers who might need talking to, and anything else that might help him do his job better, as Aricia brought him up to speed on the current state of the gang.

"I'm so, so glad that you made it back from the ruins safely, and that you got to join us again," she said, beaming. "And it's all thanks to Akira, isn't it? Although I'm not quite clear why."

"Yeah," Erio replied. "He saved me in the ruins."

"I'll have to thank him later, then."

While Aricia chatted giddily away, a frown creased Erio's brow as he recalled his encounter with Akira.

Akira fought like he knew where every monster was before he saw it, the boy thought. *And now that I think about it, he stared off in weird directions now and then, almost like he was looking at someone standing next to him...*

Suddenly, he recalled Akira's warning against saying too much. A fear that he could not explain came over him.

"What's wrong, Erio?" Aricia asked, suddenly worried.

"Nothing," he replied slowly.

"Well, if you say so. Still, if he rescued you, you must have been in danger. Did he save you from a monster attack?"

"Aricia!" Erio turned grim, startling her. "Please. Don't. Ask."

"A-All right." Aricia flinched away, but she assented to his demand.

Erio knew that her questions probably touched on exactly those things

that Akira wanted him to keep to himself. What would the hunter do to him if he shared that information—or to Aricia if she learned it? A chill slid down Erio's spine.

"Erio, are you all right?" Aricia asked, concerned once more.

Erio took a moment to compose himself and then smiled to reassure her. "I'm fine."

Inwardly, however, he swore to carry Akira's secret to his grave.

Chapter 18: Shopping for a Powered Suit

After returning from Sheryl's base to his cramped hotel room, Akira finally allowed himself to express his sheer delight. While he had played it cool outside, there was no need to pretend in private. He spread the roll of bills from Katsuragi on the floor before himself and fixed his gaze on them.

"Eight million aurum!" he marveled. "Not too long ago, I couldn't believe that I made two hundred grand and booked a hotel room for twenty thousand a night! *This* is an entire order of magnitude greater!" The sum was so enormous that it had seemed unreal when he accepted it. But now, as he stared at the roll of bills, their physical, tangible presence bowled him over.

That money won't last long, just so you know, Alpha said, interrupting his exaltation. *To be precise, we're going to spend it all tomorrow.*

"A-All of it?!" Akira repeated incredulously. "This is eight million aurum we're talking about!"

And we'll go through pocket change like that in no time.

"Pocket change?! You've gotta be kidding me! Eight million aurum is a fortune!"

Akira couldn't process that kind of financial thinking. He had become a hunter, exchanged the ground of an alleyway for a hotel bed, and achieved levels of financial success that he had never even dreamed of before—but his mind remained stuck in his old life. So he couldn't see the bills before him as pocket change. And no matter how much money he earned, he would never leave his old life behind unless he spent his earnings wisely.

Slum dwellers killed each other over three hundred aurum. Eight *million*?! That was beyond comparison, and he could hardly imagine the kind of attacks he would have to fend off to protect it.

It's pocket change, Alpha repeated calmly. *Hunters on the Front Line spend more than this on one battle's ammunition.*

“Oh, come on. You can’t compare me to the best of the best.”

To reach the ruin I have in mind, you need to aim even higher. You need to get your own top-of-the-line weapons someday, and ammo for them is going to cost you. You won’t last if you lose your cool over a little sum like this when that time comes. So, yes, I call it pocket change.

To the average person in the East, eight million aurum was a considerable sum. It would purchase a few years of easy living in the right part of the lower district—longer in areas near the slums. If Akira was willing to put up with modest living standards and the risk of being murdered by robbers in a bad neighborhood, he could survive for over a decade on his savings alone.

But Alpha had other plans in mind, and she wanted him to consider the sum trifling. He hemmed and hawed but eventually caved, even as he hesitated in the face of the expectations placed on him.

“That reminds me,” he remarked as an afterthought, “you haven’t told me anything about the ruin you want me to explore for you. What’s it like?”

That’s a secret, Alpha replied with a sly smile. *I wouldn’t want you to chicken out on me. For now, I’ll only tell you that you couldn’t even reach it with your current gear.*

“I’m no expert, but that still doesn’t sound very motivating.”

Don’t worry. Once you’re better equipped, it won’t seem totally impossible—just possibly manageable instead.

“Is that how it works?” Akira frowned. He couldn’t imagine equipment that would make such a difference.

It is, Alpha replied, soothing his doubts with a deliberately confident smile. *And that’s why we’re going to invest that eight million aurum on kitting you out. For now, upgrading your gear is our top priority.*

Most up-and-coming hunters worked this way, acquiring better equipment for exploring more dangerous and profitable ruins, then spending the profits on even better gear. Akira tried to imagine this cycle and failed to picture where it would all lead.

Someday, when you’ve gained enough skill and outfitted yourself with gear to match, your sense of what counts as a lot of money will change, Alpha assured him. *Keep working until that day comes. I’ll be right here with you.*

“I’ll try, anyway.” Akira made an effort to return her grin.

I know you've already heard this from Katsuragi, but elite hunters don't pay for their gear in cash. After all, they can't exactly walk around with that kind of money on them. Most open bank accounts and pay by card, so let's get the formalities out of the way and set one up for you.

Akira took another look at the bills on the floor, feeling that they weren't quite as precious to him as they had seemed a moment ago. "Okay, I get it. My sense of money's gonna go off the rails," he grumbled. "I guess I can't go back to living in the slums anymore."

That's the spirit! Keep it up!

She gave a cheerful grin, and Akira returned a strained one of his own. Then he asked, "So, what are we going to spend this on?"

Something that will allow me to support you more efficiently. Eight million aurum should pay for something basic. At least, I think so.

"Only something basic? For this much money?!" Akira repeated, confounded. "What are you planning to buy?"

A powered suit.

"Oh. Those make it easier to carry heavy things and stuff, right?"

Exactly. But with my help, they'll do more than that for you, Alpha replied. Now her smile looked fearless and proud. *Expect* great *things.*

The next day, Akira paid another visit to Cartridge Freak. Shizuka was leaning on the counter, resting her chin on her hands and looking bored, but she straightened up and smiled when she saw him.

"Welcome," she said. "Are you back for more ammo?"

"No, I'm looking for some advice about buying new gear," Akira replied.

Shizuka flashed a teasing grin. "Oh? I'm glad to hear that you're finally in the mood to upgrade. It's been a long time since you bought that AAH on your first visit. Keeping a business afloat on just ammo sales isn't easy, you know."

"S-Sorry about that." Akira looked flustered, apparently taking her at her word.

"I'm kidding, I'm kidding." Shizuka laughed. "I'm sorry. Now, what do you want to ask?"

"Well, you see..." Akira let out a sigh of relief and explained his interest in buying a powered suit.

“Hm,” Shizuka mused. “So, that’s what you’re looking for. Well, I do sell powered suits, but they’re not exactly my specialty.”

Firearms were her main business, she explained. Unlike a specialty store, she had no display suits that Akira could try on. And while she could order what he wanted, it would take time for the goods to arrive.

“I can handle the initial adjustments for you here, but you might be better off doing your actual shopping at a dedicated powered-suit dealer,” she concluded.

“Hm.” This time it was Akira’s turn to ponder. “But I don’t know where to find one of those specialty places, or if they’d even let me in,” he said. “And I don’t know anything about powered suits, so I’m worried that I’d just go with whatever the salespeople told me.”

“Well, yes, that does happen.”

“And Sara told me that I should take your advice if I was ever wondering what gear to buy. If it’s not too much trouble, I’d really like to hear your thoughts.”

This cheered Shizuka up. “When you put it like that, how can I refuse?” she said. “All right, I’ll give you my opinion, for what it’s worth. What’s your budget?”

“Eight million aurum, and I can pay in cash,” Akira answered casually, thrilled that she had agreed.

Shizuka reeled, then fixed him with a suspicious eye. “Where did you get that money? You would have had to sell a lot of relics—or some highly valuable ones—to make eight million aurum by hunting. Either way would mean you visited some awfully dangerous places. Don’t tell me you took a risk like that so soon after your last brush with death.” Shizuka had a strong sense of intuition, as well as being naturally perceptive, and she easily guessed the source of his funds.

“Oh, no, I just, er, took a bunch of relics I’d been saving up and sold them all at once. I’d been keeping them hidden because, for a kid like me, walking around with a lot of money is like painting a target on my back.” Akira sensed that, beneath Shizuka’s stern gaze, she cared deeply for him, and for some reason that unsettled him. “I’m trying to play it as safe as I can. Like you said, I almost died the other day, so this seemed like a good time to upgrade my gear,” he continued, stringing together disjointed excuses like a scolded child. “I settled on a powered suit because it’ll help

me run away if things get bad, so you could say that I put in a little extra work so I can take fewer risks down the road...”

Akira wasn’t used to being the subject of concern—especially when the other person didn’t stand to gain anything by it. Deep down, he felt overjoyed, although he wasn’t aware of it. So Shizuka’s tone made him at once embarrassed and contrite. If he had been talking to Sheryl, he would have brushed her off with “Shut up” or “Don’t ask.” Akira himself wasn’t aware of how differently he treated each of them.

Akira answered evasively, but he wasn’t technically lying. He wanted to play it safe, and he had only taken risks he had to for his future security. It just so happened that this required pushing himself beyond his limits.

Shizuka intuited as much from his attitude. Even so, she drove her point home with a stern warning.

“Don’t rush into any danger you don’t have to. Is that clear?”

“Yes,” Akira agreed without protest.

“Good.” Shizuka nodded her approval, smiled, and moved on to other business. “Now, why don’t you tell me what you’re looking for in a powered suit? Dream big—wishing doesn’t cost anything.”

But as she listened to Akira explain his desired specifications, she began to grow suspicious, although she didn’t let it show. He was looking for features that weren’t quite what she would expect from a first-time buyer. He wanted something that would stand up to long periods of continuous use, maintaining above-average strength at all times rather than gaining short bursts of power that could send a tank flying. He preferred a suit that was easy to put on, take off, and maintain over one that had the defense of a tank or mech—and required an assistant a full hour to equip. But it was when he started rattling off his needs for the suit’s control system that she raised her eyebrows.

“It’s true that powered suits come in all types,” she said. Some suits looked like lightweight tights or thick clothes, while on the other extreme some were practically wearable tanks. “And a lot of them showcase their control systems—especially the mechanical models.”

Most suits came equipped with control devices that augmented the wearer’s movements. The strength to tear through steel wouldn’t do anyone much good if they tore up everything else they grasped too. And many models offered other benefits besides enhanced strength—in particular, the

ability to integrate with data terminals, scanners, and more improved one's combat proficiency in a number of ways.

Shizuka knew all these sales pitches, but something still felt off to her.

"You want a control system that's integrated with and adjusts the entire suit?" she repeated, doubtful. "Akira, who recommended that to you?"

Akira frowned. He was relaying Alpha's demands, but he couldn't exactly say so.

"I don't really know the details," he said at last. "I just heard that those were the best kind. Sorry if I said something crazy or off the wall."

Shizuka was intrigued. The boy didn't have definite knowledge or preferences of his own, her instincts told her; he was only parroting what someone else had told him.

Most hunters who could afford it wore powered suits—with the exception of those who had augmentations (like Sara), cyborg implants, or other physical combat modifications. So, Shizuka speculated, some hunter whom Akira had met on a patrol job or something had probably given the boy advice as a subtle way of boasting about their own suit. That explanation made sense to her, so she decided he didn't need a detailed lecture on all the various options available, at least for the time being.

"It's all right," she replied, smiling. "I was just curious because some of what you said sounds like something an expert would say, though that's probably just coincidence. But don't worry, I got the general idea." Then Shizuka became all business. "Now, are you sure you'd like me to choose a suit for you based on those criteria?"

"Yes, I'd really appreciate it."

"Then, since this would go through a wholesaler, and I am running a business here, I need your payment up front and in full. I could pick out a suit and contact you with the details before you formally place the order, if you like, although that would take a little extra time."

Akira considered for a moment. "Would it speed things up if I paid now?"

"Yes, that would make my negotiations with wholesalers go a lot smoother," Shizuka answered. "Ready money talks. Ten thousand aurum one second from now speaks louder than one million aurum next year."

"In that case, I'll pay now. I set up a bank account, so please withdraw the money from that. And while you're at it, could you set it up so I can pay

for ammo and things the same way from now on?" Akira dug out his hunter ID. With his new account open, the ID doubled as a debit card.

"Um, are you really sure?" Shizuka asked. It seemed to her like he was making an awful lot of snap judgments at one go. "Eight million aurum is a lot of money, you know. And I can't refund you if you change your mind after I withdraw it. You do understand that, right?"

"Yes, I understand."

The shopkeeper hesitated. "Okay, but what will you do if you don't like the suit I pick out?"

"That won't be a problem."

Shizuka frowned, displeased that Akira seemed to be ignoring her warnings. She gave him a disapproving look and cautioned once more, "I'm glad you trust me, but I think you ought to think about this decision more carefully."

The shopkeeper was concerned that Akira might be taken advantage of at other establishments. Plenty of merchants saw hunters as no more than a revenue stream. The worst bordered on con artists, determined to fleece customers who probably wouldn't live long anyway for all they were worth.

Akira met Shizuka's gaze and replied earnestly, "I don't think racking my brains more will change my decision. Someone I owe my life to recommended your store, and if I can't trust you, I might as well give up on shopping altogether. So I'm fine with this."

It wasn't that Akira felt sure he would like whatever Shizuka picked out for him, the shopkeeper realized, but that he was determined to accept whatever came his way.

"And if something goes wrong," he went on, "well, them's the breaks. My luck's so bad I ran into two swarms of monsters in one day, so I wouldn't be surprised." Ruefully, Akira added, "Me worrying won't do anything to change that, so there's not much point."

Shizuka listened in silence. She realized that the boy was trying to trust, as much as he could, and that he had chosen her business as most worthy of his faith. That he had entrusted himself to her and her store warmed her heart. So, determined to reassure him that he had not made a mistake, the shopkeeper gave him her most confident smile.

"I suppose I can't refuse you now that you've said all that. All right, leave everything to me." She took Akira's hunter ID, waved it over the card

reader on her counter, and did something at her computer.

The payment was soon processed, deducting eight million aurum from Akira's account. True to Alpha's word, the "trifling sum" was gone in an instant, leaving a discouragingly low balance behind.

"So, you're a hunter with an account of your own now," Shizuka said, returning his ID. "Do take care, or you'll be living in debt before you know it."

Akira would not have been the first hunter to suffer this fate. From runaway ammo costs to penalties and indemnities from failed jobs, there were plenty of things that could wipe out one's savings. Sometimes the Hunter Office would cover a hunter's debts—though naturally the Office expected to be paid back with interest. Those who failed to repay these loans ended up compelled to explore dangerous ruins at the Office's behest, or spent their lives in forced labor trying to keep on top of the interest.

"I understand," Akira replied, taking the warning to heart.

"Good answer. Now, step this way so I can measure you for your new suit."

Akira allowed Shizuka to lead him behind the counter and into her ammunition-cluttered workroom.

"I need to be precise, so strip down to your underwear," she said.

He did so, and she began measuring him from head to toe using a handheld scanner.

"Try not to move," she added. "It can throw off the results."

"Is getting my measurements right really that big a deal?"

"There's a little leeway, since human bodies change every day, but it's still best to be as accurate as possible. A specialty shop would be even more rigorous if you wanted something made to order."

Shizuka explained that when a hunter wanted to purchase custom-made gear from a specialist, they had to wear special clothes and step into a giant machine that measured the most minute details of their body. Besides recording their build and skeletal structure, the scan mapped out the exact placement of their organs and nerves, the distribution of nanomachine reserves within the body, and a host of other details. All this data then went into the creation of a powered suit that was as adapted to its wearer as possible. Such equipment boasted performance—and a price tag—that left off-the-shelf models in the dust.

As Shizuka spoke, her face grew clouded. Scars of all sizes covered the boy's body, she now saw. The wounds that he had suffered in his recent battle with the two monster packs caught her eye. Jamming medicine directly into nearly fatal wounds left marks that looked like gashes in his skin had been roughly welded shut. The shopkeeper could tell at a glance that he had forgone proper treatment in favor of a quick boost to life support and getting himself back into fighting shape.

He'd been unfortunate enough to fall into such calamities, and fortunate enough to get out alive. If the balance of fate had tipped against him even the least bit more, he would have died. And so long as he kept hunting, he would collect similar wounds for the rest of his life. Before she knew it, the sight of the boy's scarred flesh brought her hands to a stop as she measured.

"Shizuka?" Akira asked, wondering what was up.

"I'm fine. It's nothing." Shizuka smiled a bit to indicate all was well and returned to her task. Soon, she had all the measurements that she needed.

"There! All done!" she exclaimed enthusiastically, trying to cheer herself up. Her usual smile returned. "You can put your clothes back on now. I'd guess that your powered suit will be here in a week at the earliest and a month at the latest. I'll let you know as soon as it arrives, and I'd appreciate it if you'd pick it up right away."

"Sure thing," Akira replied. "Thank you for all your advice."

"Don't mention it. Once you have a powered suit, you'll start collecting heavier—and pricier—weaponry. I can't wait for you to grow into an even more frequent customer," she joked with a meaningful grin.

Akira smiled back. "I'll work as hard as I can without overdoing it," he said. "So wait for me."

"I'm counting on it."

Akira returned to the front of the store with her, said his goodbyes, and left without another word. From behind the counter, Shizuka waved as he departed.

Once he was gone, she laughed—not from amusement, but rather to raise her own spirits. "Well, then, time to live up to that boy's trust!"

Cheerfully, she went straight to work.

◆

Having placed his order and returned to his hotel, Akira asked Alpha what she had next on her agenda. Her answer surprised him: they wouldn't leave the city until his suit arrived. Naturally, that meant that hunting relics in the ruins and training in the wastelands were both canceled.

"I get calling off relic hunting, since we need to go into the ruins for that, but what's wrong with a little target practice in the desert?" Akira asked. "Are we seriously not going to leave the city at all?"

We will not, Alpha repeated. *Stay in your room until your suit is ready. We've been neglectful of your studies and gathering intel lately, and now's the chance to fix that. If we stick to cheaper hotels, you should easily be able to go a month without income.*

Akira grimaced. "I'd rather make one more trip for relics than cut back on living expenses." Cheaper hotels meant cheaper rooms and no baths. This was not at all to his liking.

Alpha shot him down at once. *No. As I told you, your bad luck is worse than I accounted for, so I'm not letting you out of this city until you've got a powered suit. And besides, don't you want to master reading and writing?*

"Well, you've got me there." Akira was becoming more literate—Alpha made an excellent tutor—but he still needed her help a lot of the time.

Then what are we waiting for? If you do well, I'll reward you by taking off a piece of my clothing for every—oh! *That won't work on you, will it? Seriously, why can't you behave like a normal, healthy boy?*

Akira had a bad feeling about where she was going. "Knock it off and let's start studying."

But Alpha wasn't about to let him change the subject. *Let's try it the other way. I'll* add *a piece of clothing for every exercise you do well, so do your best if you* don't *want me to stay naked.*

And Alpha immediately deleted all of her simulated clothing, revealing her beautiful, bare flesh to Akira's gaze. Countless calculations lay beneath her flawless figure, her unearthly beauty—tailored now to Akira's tastes. Away from the wastelands, it had a considerable effect.

"Stop screwing around and cover up!" Akira yelled.

No. We need results. Now, shall we begin? Alpha smirked and flaunted her nude body in the flustered boy's face.

But Alpha was serious, in her own way, and insisted that Akira study under these conditions. True to her word, she added one piece of clothing to

her outfit at a time, but she made a point to choose skimpy and daring articles. These she wore in the loosest, most suggestive way possible, which whittled away at Akira's concentration. As a result, it took him a full week to get her looking more or less decent again.

Chapter 19: The Kid Who Was a Land Mine

Akira spent the next two weeks immersed in his studies. Faithful to Alpha's instructions, he didn't step outside his cheap hotel room—a cramped space with no bath, only a simple shower. But despite his diminished lifestyle, he remained in high spirits as he looked forward to his eight-million-aurum suit. And he grew positively excited once he received the estimated delivery date.

And he was learning swiftly, thanks to Alpha's assistance. By layering augmented reality over his vision, she constructed a fully equipped classroom. An interactive whiteboard floated in the air before them, and the notebooks he'd bought at the store became textbooks when she made pictures and text appear on their blank pages.

It wasn't just her teaching aids that helped, however. She herself taught clearly and efficiently—quite a luxury, given that she was devoting her full attention to Akira at all times rather than dividing it among a class of students. In short, she created a school that money couldn't buy. And so, Akira learned by leaps and bounds.

Then, one day, Alpha turned her pointer from the writing on the whiteboard to Akira's data terminal.

Sheryl wants to speak with you, she informed him.

Akira picked up his terminal but saw no sign of a message from Sheryl. Then, to his consternation, a visual and audible alert notified him of her incoming call.

"Hey, how did you know before it came in?" he asked.

Because I took over that terminal, as I seem to recall telling you before. Alpha looked smug.

That didn't totally satisfy Akira's doubts, but he accepted the call and turned his attention to it.

"I know you must be busy, so I'm sorry to bother you, but could you

please come to the base right now?" Sheryl asked, a note of panic in her voice. "We have a visitor from another gang, and he insists on talking to you in person. I tried to turn him down, but he threatened to barge into your hotel room."

"What does he want to talk to me for?" Akira responded, nonplussed. "I mean, it's *your* gang."

"He says he won't deal with me. Outsiders think I'm just your proxy, so he might not see a point in negotiating with me."

Akira considered briefly. After so long cooped up in his tiny hotel room, he unconsciously longed for a breather, and that desire won out.

"All right," he said. "I'll be right there. Find out what he wants in the meantime."

"I will. Thank you very much." Sheryl sounded just a little less anxious as she ended the call.

Alpha, on the other hand, seemed unhappy. *I thought I asked you to stay inside until your suit is ready*, she grumbled.

"Oh, come on. Give me a break now and then," Akira responded. "It's not like I'll be going to the wastelands, so what's the big deal? Anyway, I already said yes."

I suppose I'll have to allow it. Alpha chuckled as though humoring a small child. *But make sure you're fully kitted out before you leave. Is that clear?*

"Crystal."

And by the time he set out for Sheryl's base, Akira was geared up as if he were heading for the ruins.

◆

It sounds like he'll come, even if he isn't happy about it. I'm in luck, Sheryl thought after Akira cut off the call, sighing in relief as she looked at her data terminal.

She then turned her attention to her troublesome guests: a man called Wataba, who demanded to see Akira, and his entourage. They looked like the rough and rowdy types you'd find in any lawless district. In other words, they looked like henchmen for some gang boss—which in fact they were. But even if they were just underlings, they were still grown men who

made their livings in the slums, and their looks were enough to browbeat children. Sheryl could see the hint of fear appearing in her young followers.

She had asserted her status as a gang leader and stood up to the men. Or at least she was trying to.

"Akira said he's coming, and he wants me to hear you out in the meantime," she said. "So I'll ask you again: what are you here for?"

"And *I* said I'll tell you when that Akira kid gets here," Wataba responded derisively.

"Weren't you listening?! He just told me to talk to you!" Sheryl glared at Wataba, but he was unfazed.

"Shut up!" he blustered. "I already *said* that I ain't gonna tell you *shit* until the brat shows up!"

Wataba had nothing but contempt for Sheryl and her gang. After all, he had once followed Syberg himself. He knew the children, but to him they were simply his inferiors from the defunct gang.

By chance, he hadn't been part of the attack on Akira, being occupied with other business at the time. Yet he'd still steered clear of the hunter in the aftermath of Syberg's fall. Over time, however, Wataba had come to believe that Syberg's group had just gotten careless. Surely he himself must be better than a girl whose only skill was currying favor with men, or a boy whom she had talked into becoming her patron.

Glaring at the men was the most that Sheryl could do. Threats or force were out of the question. She did carry a gun, but so did they, and she couldn't bring herself to pull the trigger on a firefight.

The other children mirrored Sheryl's anxiety in the face of the men's scorn. Seeing this, Wataba and his toughs lost much of their concern about Akira as well. The boy was technically a hunter, so they had planned to take some basic safety measures, at least, but now they didn't feel the need for even that much caution.

Then Akira appeared, and suddenly all eyes were on him. The mood in the room told him that he was definitely in for a hassle. He remained the center of attention as he walked up to Sheryl and demanded, "So, what do they want?"

"W-Well—"

Wataba cut Sheryl's faltering response short with a laugh. "She didn't get a word out of us! Looks like she let you down!"

Sheryl glared murder at the man, but he just kept sneering.

Akira sighed and repeated his question to Wataba.

"So, what do you want with me?"

"It's simple," the man announced. "Hand over this base and all of your territory!"

The demand stunned Sheryl and her underlings. Yet it was true that, although they had inherited Syberg's turf, they were finding it difficult to maintain the decently large area with their current numbers. In the slums, poor management led to unnecessary conflict, leaving both Sheryl's gang and the neighboring groups between a rock and a hard place.

Wataba's boss, a man named Shijima, had noticed that Sheryl's gang was too small for its turf and decided it would be easy to extort some of their territory for himself. Wataba, he had thought, would make a good messenger, since the children would be more willing to negotiate with a former comrade than a total stranger. But when Wataba had seen how intimidated the children looked, he had taken it upon himself to change his leader's demands.

Naturally, Sheryl found his new terms unacceptable.

"You gotta be kidding!" she snapped in spite of herself. "I'd never agree to that!"

"Shut up! Nobody asked you!" Wataba roared, shutting her down.

Sheryl flinched.

Wataba drank in her strained look of frustration and sneered at the other gang. Then he turned his threats on Akira. Far from being cautious of the hunter, Wataba now blatantly looked down on him, and his condescending tone announced that he expected Akira to agree as a matter of course.

"So, what'll it be?" he pressed. "You're gonna fork it over, yeah?"

But Akira casually upended Wataba's expectations.

"Sheryl already turned you down," he said, unruffled. "Don't come crying to me."

Wataba was stunned, but his surprise soon gave way to irritation.

"I'm asking *you*," he snarled menacingly. "Ain't this your gang?"

"This is Sheryl's base, and she's the boss around here, not me," Akira responded coolly. "So ask her and leave me alone. If you'd just talked to her, I wouldn't have even needed to trek out here. Don't call me in for every little thing. You've said your piece now, so get lost. I'll be leaving too."

Akira's casual dismissal flamed Wataba's annoyance into anger.

"Don't get too full of yourself," the man warned. "I'm with Shijima, and his gang's nothing like this pack of puny brats. His turf is huge, and he's got a shit ton of guys! You think you can turn him down and get away with it?!"

"Like I care."

By this time, Wataba was burning with rage, but Akira still saw the situation as someone else's problem. He seemed as disinterested as ever. The boy's apparent contempt, on top of his refusal, stoked Wataba's fury. The man's expression was contorted, mirroring his mounting rage, and Akira's calm only added fuel to the fire.

But then Wataba suddenly regained his confident sneer. "Do you think we don't know about you?" he scoffed.

"What do you know?" Akira eyed him with suspicion.

Wataba grinned darkly. This was the reaction he'd expected. "I told you that we're a big gang, remember? It wasn't hard for us to track down your hotel."

Akira considered for a moment.

Alpha.

You're in a bad position, she replied, anticipating his thoughts. *Move over there.*

Akira moved to the spot that she indicated in silence, then turned and stood with his back to the wall.

"You found my hotel?" he scoffed. "So what? Are you and a mob gonna storm the place? You must be brain-dead. I'm hardly the only hunter staying there, and the security company the hotel has a contract with won't take that lying down either. Go ahead and try, Mr. I've-got-a-death-wish."

"Th-That's not all!" Wataba shouted, stubbornly doubling down. "We know all about where you shop too! Don't you care what happens to your favorite arms dealer?!"

Akira let out an affected sigh, concealing the turbulence in his heart while he surreptitiously reached for his rifle.

"Just to be nice, I'll fill you in," he said. "That shop belongs to a guy called Katsuragi. He may look like your average merchant, but his skills got him to the Front Line and back with a truckload of stuff to sell. If you gang up on him, you'll just get yourselves killed."

A crude grin spread across Wataba's face.

Akira reached his breaking point. *Alpha, back me up.*

Alpha guessed what Akira wanted to do and tried to caution him against it. *Akira, I really think you ought to give more thought to—*

But before she had a chance to finish her appeal, the sneering Wataba opened his big mouth one too many times.

"Not him! I mean the bitch with—"

Gunfire filled the room.

Wataba flew backwards, a blast of anti-monster bullets striking his chest. Blood sprayed from his back, spattering on the wall behind him even as he slammed into it. Then he crumpled forward, a look of surprise frozen on his face. He hit the floor with a loud thud and expired. A red pool spread from his corpse and began to stain the floor.

Akira had killed Wataba without a moment's hesitation, taking everyone by surprise.

The other men stood immobile, shaken.

Then one poor soul had the misfortune to come to his senses first. He drew his gun.

Akira blew away his legs.

The man crumpled to the floor, his lower body shredded. While he writhed, crying out in pain, Akira trained his rifle on the others—a warning to hold back.

Belatedly, the children began to scream. Some stared around the room in confusion. Others retreated into corners or attempted to flee the room. Few could deal with the sudden violence.

Did you need to kill him, Akira? Alpha asked, looking stern.

Yes, Akira answered without any hint of doubt.

Alpha sighed, annoyed and resigned, then resumed her usual smile. *I see. Well, there's no sense crying over spilled milk, but don't let your guard down. This isn't over.*

Yeah, I know.

Alpha didn't care how many people Akira killed, but she did prefer to avoid pointless violence that could make things harder for them. And all the while, she continued to speculate. Despite Akira's distaste for trouble, he kept making more of it for himself. He considered himself unlucky, but he actively courted misfortune! And he didn't see that as a contradiction. Some personal standard, some mysterious line, guided his paradoxical actions.

Wataba's behavior had crossed that line, triggering Akira's violent reaction. Alpha considered a thorough understanding of his standard to be vital to inducing Akira's future actions, and so she continued to monitor him.

"Drop your weapons," Akira ordered. He waved his rifle menacingly at the remaining men. "Five, four, three..."

Those who were still on their feet quickly tossed away their guns, but the man on the floor was in too much pain to comply. Akira pointed his rifle toward the man's head.

"Two, one—"

"Wait!" one of the other men cried frantically. "I'll help him! Don't shoot!"

But only after he disarmed the man on the floor, kicking away both his comrade's gun and his own, did Akira finally lower his rifle.

The room fell silent. Despite having just killed without warning, Akira seemed his usual self. Everyone else, however, was watching him with frightened eyes.

"So, you're from that Shijima guy?" Akira asked the men.

"Y-Yeah, we are. Just don't shoot, okay?"

"Lead me to him. Sheryl, let's go."

Sheryl was stunned, unable to fully process what had just happened. When Akira's words finally got through to her, her body stiffened, overcome by panic. At last she came to her senses, and her expression twisted wildly.

"Excuse me?!" she screamed.

◆

Shijima, like Sheryl, ran one of the countless gangs that dotted the slums. Unlike Sheryl's fledgling group, however, Shijima's had far more members and a much larger area under its control—a midsize syndicate with plenty of influence.

Akira and Sheryl stood in Shijima's headquarters. The latter's subordinates had ushered them into a large room—occupied, as one might expect, with many more of his followers.

A panicked underling had informed Shijima of their arrival. The gang leader had listened with a certain amount of skepticism, as some of the

details reported to him seemed dubious, but he decided that Syberg's successor and her hunter patron merited a personal audience.

Shijima made Akira and Sheryl wait, and when he finally entered the room, he saw just what he'd been told to expect: Akira, calm as ever; Sheryl, obviously nerve-wracked; one of his men, grimacing from bullet wounds while others supported him; and Wataba's corpse, which had left a trail on the floor as it was dragged in. The sight lent credibility to the underling's report—Akira had come to see Shijima with the dead man in tow.

The man who had lost a leg had received only basic first aid before being left here for questioning.

"I'm done with him here," Shijima told one of his people. "Patch him up right. Move." The questioning was over before it began.

The gang leader watched his subordinates assist their wounded comrade out of the room, then returned his gaze to Akira.

"Did you do that?" he asked calmly. "Oh, right, I'm Shijima. I run the gang that holds this neighborhood together."

"Yeah, I did," Akira answered in the same tone. "I'm Akira, and she's Sheryl. She doesn't have much to do with the killing, but it's still kind of her business. So I brought her along to keep her in the loop."

"All right," Shijima replied. "In that case, I'll cut to the chase: what are you here for?"

"To negotiate and to check on something."

"I see. Well, have a seat."

There was a table in the center of the room, with two couches flanking it. Akira sank onto one at Shijima's invitation, and the gang leader took the seat opposite him. Sheryl remained standing, seemingly left behind.

"Aren't you gonna sit down?" Akira asked her, surprisingly casual for a kid in the heart of enemy territory.

"You might as well," Shijima added, remarkably composed for a man whose underling had just been murdered.

Sheryl lowered herself into the seat next to Akira quite awkwardly, as befitted a person visiting a more powerful gang's headquarters in the company of someone who had killed one of its members.

As the gang members glared at Akira, Shijima studied him. He saw a normal kid acting normally—but there was nothing normal about a child

who acted unperturbed under the circumstances. Seeing Sheryl and Akira sitting next to each other was a study in contrasts: the girl agitated and anxious, highlighting how strangely the boy was behaving. She was doing her best to look tough, but she couldn't hide her cold sweat and trembling. Shijima watched her try to look away from him only for her gaze to fall on Wataba's body, spurring her to hurriedly look elsewhere again. Shijima felt less cautious of her—and even more wary of Akira.

"So, you want to negotiate and to check on something? I don't know what went down, but I'll at least hear you out. Start talking." Shijima took out a data terminal and began to fiddle with it as he spoke. He clearly had no interest in negotiating and no intention of paying attention to what they had to say.

Sheryl didn't consider his attitude rude—she knew who held the power here. If anything, she was relieved by his muted reaction to Wataba's death, which she took as a sign that he wouldn't kill her on the spot.

"It'd just end with me picking you off one by one, so I wouldn't advise it," Akira said casually.

Shijima's hand paused over his data terminal. He had been on the verge of sending out a call to his heavy hitters. Initially, he'd assumed that Akira and Sheryl were there to apologize after negotiations had unexpectedly turned deadly. But once he was face-to-face with them, he had realized that Akira, at least, had no such intention.

Now the boy was basically warning him, "Stop, if you know what's good for you." If Shijima called for reinforcements, Akira would open fire right then and there before they had a chance to assemble. He was threatening to take them all out on his own, and he very much believed he could.

Shijima kept a blank face, but underneath he considered Akira's threat. Even if the boy was bluffing or just had delusions of grandeur, Shijima's gang would suffer losses in a fight—probably including Shijima himself. That wasn't exactly an attractive proposition.

And now that Akira had noticed him about to call for reinforcements, Shijima had lost his chance to kill him off easily. Strictly speaking, it was Alpha who had noticed and passed the alert to Akira, but Shijima had no way of knowing that. How the boy had figured it out didn't matter to Shijima nearly as much as the fact that he knew.

Looks like it wasn't a fluke that this boy took out Syberg and his crew, the gang leader mused, now even more cautious of him. *He doesn't look like anything special. But that's exactly why they probably took him for a regular brat—until he turned the tables on them. The kid's a walking land mine.*

Shijima slowly set his data terminal down on the table.

"You sound awfully sure of yourself," he said. His voice was still calm, but his presence filled the room.

Akira replied confidently, "This ain't the wastelands. Monsters don't turn tail and run after you kill a few."

"I see. Only a real hunter could say that."

Sheryl had been listening in silence, not quite following what was happening. But she sensed the strange mood in the air, and after a few moments she realized that they had been on the edge of bloodshed until Shijima backed down. The color drained from her face.

"What I want to check with you is simple," Akira continued, paying no attention to the girl sitting beside him. "Whatever else might have happened, I ended up killing one of your people and injuring another."

"You did," Shijima acknowledged.

"So, what's your next move? Are you gonna write the corpse off as an idiot who got himself killed, or are you gonna try to even the score? And if you want revenge, how many more of your people do I have to kill to make you give up? That's what I wanna know. Syberg's guys threw in the towel after I offed about ten of them, including Syberg. Right, Sheryl?" He turned to her for confirmation.

"Huh? Yes, th-that's right!" Sheryl responded, flustered at suddenly finding herself at the center of the disturbing conversation. "No one in my gang will ever try to kill you! I swear!"

"Nobody wants revenge for Syberg, that asshole. More of us are grateful he's gone, me included," Shijima snapped. He took a moment to calm himself before continuing. "Anyway, let's not rush things. Sure, it can save time to skip to the end of some discussions, but other times you get a different feel for things—and come to different conclusions—when you go over the details patiently and in the right order. So, tell me: why'd you kill my guy?"

"Because he threatened me," Akira answered.

“That’s all?”

“Okay, he threatened me in a way that made me want to kill him. I’ve got no sense of humor, so watch your mouth around me.”

Normally, Shijima would have laughed in the face of any dumb punk who talked like this. But not a crazy punk who showed up dragging a corpse.

“Being thorough and sincere don’t guarantee that you’ll get your point across,” Akira continued. “The guy you’re talking to still has to figure out what you’re saying. And I’m a coward, so when someone threatens to kill me, I can’t get a good night’s sleep until I kill them first. The only people who say stuff like that to me mean it, so I cut them down before they get the chance to.”

Akira stared intently at Shijima. “I’m choosing my words carefully,” he seemed to be saying. “Don’t threaten me; I’ll take your bluffs seriously.”

“By the way,” he added, “your man told Sheryl to hand over her turf, base and all. Did you send him to die and pick a fight?”

That gave Shijima pause. “Did he go that far?” he asked, looking to Sheryl for confirmation.

“H-He did say that,” she replied with a nod. She still looked flustered, but she answered with certainty.

She looked like someone trying to weasel out of a tight spot, Shijima thought, but she didn’t seem to be lying. He sighed and gently cradled his head in his hands. No one could blame another gang for taking Wataba’s behavior as a show of aggression. Given what had happened, and Akira’s willingness to kill at the drop of a hat, he decided to take a peaceful approach.

“Well, I can see that part of this is on us. Personally, I just wanted to put out any sparks that might cause a fight. And if you can’t keep a tight grip on your territory, that’s gonna make trouble for everyone.” Shijima let out a tired sigh and gave the impression of turning his attention elsewhere. “Now, as I was saying, considering our share of the blame and Wataba’s screwup, I’d like to settle this without a fuss.” He stared at Akira, soliciting a response.

“Me too. I’m not a fan of pointless bloodshed,” Akira said.

They both then looked at Sheryl, who—finding herself expected to take part in the conversation—started to panic again. “Huh? M-Me? I’ve got n-

nothing against a peaceful resolution."

Shijima turned back to Akira. "Then we're agreed. Let's work out a peaceful settlement. But no matter who started it, I want you to remember that I'm the only one who came out of this with people dead and injured."

Akira only responded with silence, which Shijima pondered as he continued. "Of course, I can't exactly ask you to let me shoot a couple of your guys. That'd just cause a whole new mess. So, let's settle this with money." He paused, as if for thought, before stating his conclusion. "One million aurum ought to clear up any hard feelings. We'll even stay on friendly terms with your gang, which should help us avoid any more situations like this one. Not a bad deal for settling a death, don't you think?"

"Sheryl, he's asking for a million aurum," Akira casually repeated to the girl beside him.

Sheryl looked confused for a moment, and when she finally processed his words, the color drained from her face once more. She couldn't pay one million aurum on demand. Yet rejecting the proposal might sink their peace agreement and set them on course toward more bloodshed. So she panicked.

"I can't!" she blurted out, practically shrieking. "I mean, I'd like to pay, but I don't have that kind of money, or even any clue how to get it!"

Akira's brow furrowed. "I can't afford it right now either. I mean it. Gear and ammo aren't free, and skimping on them'll get me killed, so I haven't got cash to spare."

"I'm sticking my neck out too, you know," Shijima said, a hint of a threat entering his voice. "Do you have any clue what'll happen if word gets out that I tried to rattle a pack of brats, then slunk off with my tail between my legs after they killed one of my guys? Every gang in town will smell blood in the water and come for a piece of me. I want to solve this with money, but there's only so low I can go. I'm already being plenty generous just by offering to let you pay off a death." He wanted to make it absolutely clear to them that his organization was making concessions despite its superior position.

A suffocating silence followed. They all had compelling reasons why they couldn't back down. But eventually, Akira sighed and reluctantly offered a compromise.

"How about half a million aurum up front and another half million later? Five hundred grand is the most I can give you on the spot."

“When can I expect the rest?” Shijima demanded.

“Once I make enough money to feel comfortable. Hunters don’t have regular income.”

Shijima fell silent. He looked like he was mulling over the proposal. That was mostly an act, though he really did have to consider what would happen if he rejected this compromise. At last, he reached a decision.

“All right.”

Akira took five hundred thousand aurum out of his backpack and placed it on the table. He had withdrawn the money from his account ahead of time just in case he needed cash.

Shijima signaled to his underlings with a jerk of his chin. One of them took the money and left the room.

“I’ll consider this matter peacefully resolved,” the gang leader declared, “although our truce is temporary until the payment’s complete. Now, get going. I’m a busy man, and I’ve got a lot to explain to my people.”

Akira rose and left the room without a word. Sheryl hurried after him.

Shijima remained in the room after watching them go, waiting quietly for his subordinates to report to him. It wasn’t long before one arrived and announced, “They’ve left the base.”

“I see.” The gang leader took a breath and then roared, “Shit! What the hell is wrong with that little punk?! He was seriously out for blood! Is he out of his goddamn mind?!” He continued venting, giving free rein to his anger. “That piece of shit Syberg finally kicked the bucket, but now I’ve got a psycho to deal with! And it’s all Syberg’s fault! The kid’s only my problem because that jackass picked a fight with him!”

“Boss, are you really going to take that bunch of kids seriously?” one of Shijima’s higher-ranking men asked, giving his winded superior a confused look.

“For now,” Shijima replied while catching his breath. “I’ll at least pretend to play nice with them while that little punk Akira is alive and kicking. I want the rest of my money, for one thing.”

One million aurum would not normally have been enough to buy peace, but the gang leader had reduced his demand in consideration of the threat that Akira posed.

“The boy’s toxic—radioactive—a bomb waiting to go off,” he added. “We don’t need to risk antagonizing that brat Sheryl while she’s got him

under control. Is that clear?"

"What'll you do if the kid bites it?"

"If he dies, that gang will fall apart without any help from us. We can think about the rest when the time comes. We'll probably need to work with the other groups when it comes to divvying up their territory, for one thing." He would have worked out the details already if Sheryl hadn't thrown a wrench into his plans.

"Come to think of it, we wouldn't be in this mess if Sheryl hadn't brought in Akira and started her own gang. We would've gotten a chunk of new turf and called it a day." Shijima's irritation began to mount again as he thought of the cause of his unexpected trouble. "It's all Syberg's fault again! Sheryl used to take orders from that jackass! Shit!"

Shijima was still trying to keep his cool when his gaze fell on Wataba's corpse, and he started roaring again.

"This guy was one of Syberg's too! I let him join up 'cause he brought some decent swag with him, but that's all worthless compared to the mess he's brought us now! That bastard Syberg is cursing me from beyond the grave! Shit! Get that trash out of here! It's an eyesore!"

Wataba's remains were heaved carelessly out of the room and then, just as carelessly, disposed of.

The wasteland had its perils, but the slums could be deadly in their own way. There, those who made the wrong choices or acted the fool were the first to perish, and anyone who did both ended up as a casually discarded corpse.

Chapter 20: Rebuilding a Heart

After Akira and Sheryl finished negotiating with Shijima, Akira walked Sheryl back to her base. But they went at a snail's pace, even compared to their earlier trip when they'd had a corpse in tow.

Poor Sheryl trailed after Akira so slowly that even when he walked normally, he left her in the dust. He called to her every time she fell too far behind, and she scrambled to catch up—at first. But as they went on, the distance between them soon widened again. Each time Sheryl rushed to catch up, she moved more slowly: first running, then walking, until she finally gave up altogether.

Akira wasn't the most emotionally perceptive boy, but even he realized that something was wrong with her. When he retraced his steps to check on her, she was hanging her head and noiselessly crying. Perplexed, he stood beside her until she finally noticed his presence and slowly, silently, looked up at him.

At any other time, Sheryl would have at least said something to make sure she stayed in Akira's good books. But not now. Simply raising her head took all her strength.

His bewildered eyes met her teary ones, and he became painfully aware that his people skills weren't up to this situation. A moment passed, and then, hesitantly, he ventured, "Wh-What's up?"

Sheryl's expression crumpled, and she began to wail.

It's not my fault this time, is it? Akira asked, with a pleading glance at Alpha. He couldn't help remembering that his first meeting with Sheryl had gone much the same way.

I wouldn't be so sure, Alpha replied smugly. *Anyway, this is going to look just as bad to anyone passing this time as it did the last time.*

Akira grimaced.

Back in his cramped hotel room, Akira felt at his wit's end. He had managed to get indoors, away from prying eyes, but he still had to figure

out what to do about the sobbing girl in front of him, a task his social skills fell far short of.

Dragging the crying Sheryl back to her base would invite misunderstandings, but he couldn't just ignore her either. So, after some deliberation, he had brought her back to his hotel, just as he had the last time. A bath had done a lot to calm her down then, but his current cheap room didn't have one, and he doubted that its basic shower would be an effective replacement.

Akira racked his brains but could only come up with one solution. It wouldn't have been his first choice, but he was frantic enough to give it a try.

With no little trepidation, he approached Sheryl and wrapped his arms around her without a word. Shizuka's hug, he remembered, had flustered him at first but ended up soothing him. He didn't really understand why hugs seemed to help, but he imitated the shopkeeper now nonetheless, figuring that he could just stop if Sheryl didn't like it.

She accepted his embrace without any resistance. After a few moments, she hugged him back. At the same time, her sobs intensified. Akira hurriedly tried to back away, but Sheryl clung desperately to him and refused to let him go. He sighed and relaxed, abandoning any idea of pulling away, and lightly wrapped his arms around her again.

A little while later, Sheryl's sobs ceased. Akira realized that she had fallen asleep, probably worn out from crying.

"What was that about?" he muttered, looking tired. He didn't really expect to ever find an answer.

◆

Sheryl was at the utter limits of her endurance. Her mind was in a fragile state, like glasswork crisscrossed with hairline cracks: the slightest shock would pulverize it.

The strain of recent events threatened to crush her. Her old gang had fallen apart, and she had failed to find a place in one of the neighboring groups. She had been thrown out into the back alleys of the slums, deprived of the foundation and support that she had counted on to provide her with the basic necessities of life.

It was a harsh predicament for a young girl, with no end in sight. Perhaps that was what had led her exhausted mind astray. Whatever the cause, she had tried to bargain with Akira, hoping against hope that he wouldn't remember her involvement in the attack on him and could provide her with a way out of her current plight. But no such luck—Akira had seen through her before they'd even really had a chance to talk. She had trembled at his threats, fearing for her life; she'd survived, but at the cost of further fractures in her worn-out spirit.

Then, through a series of unexpected developments, Sheryl had gained Akira's patronage. But this had come at a cost: she had been forced to take over Syberg's turf as the boss of a new gang. And even the hunter's support had been no guarantee of her immediate safety. When the group of Syberg's old men had stormed into her new base, she'd managed to bluff her way through—but she knew she'd had a brush with death. One more straw on the camel's back.

And then running her gang had presented her with one problem after another. At first, Akira had taken his sweet time putting in an appearance. When he finally had shown up, her underling had picked a fight with him. The merchant whom Akira had introduced her to had scared her out of her wits, and Akira himself had threatened to kill her if she did anything stupid. Time and again, Sheryl had been forced to recognize that the hunter was her partner but not her ally.

Finally, there was this mess with Shijima. Bargaining while knowing that a firefight could break out at any moment had whittled away what little remained of Sheryl's spirit. On the way back from his base, she dragged her feet under the weight of her fears for the future. Her heart was already at the breaking point, and when she realized what lay ahead of her—more days of being worn down like this—it shattered.

Sheryl wept and sobbed, hardly aware she did so, desperate for someone—anyone—to cling to. Sometime later, she became aware that someone was holding her tight. She couldn't tell who it was, but the embrace seemed to say it was okay to rely on them.

Sheryl returned the hug with all her might, determined to never let go. And as the last of her strength slipped away, she felt just a little relieved that whoever it was didn't push her away as she drifted off to sleep.

◆

Akira was sitting on the floor, fiddling with his data terminal. Sheryl's arms were still wrapped around him. Her weight had nearly knocked him over when she had fallen asleep. Even after he had hurriedly sat down, she had shown no sign of loosening her grip, so he had let her be and had decided to kill time browsing online until she woke up. Technically, this counted as practice gathering intel.

The internet contained such a vast wealth of information that tracking down any specific fact was almost impossible without a search engine. Numerous sites existed for the purpose, but even with their help, looking things up was a challenge for a kid who had spent most of his life in the back alleys.

Important or valuable information generally needed to be purchased through individuals or organizations that made a living trading intelligence. Numerous paid sites offered hunters the opportunity to buy or sell data on the locations of profitable ruins, or strategies to bring down powerful monsters.

Other sites with their own motives made a wider variety of information available for free. Any hunter worth their salt had to be able to sift out the most valuable and reliable bits of data from such sources. Akira, on the other hand, still hadn't mastered looking up the next day's weather or where to grab a bite to eat. Alpha would bring up the information in an instant if he asked, but he needed to practice finding his own answers. Just now he was immersed in the universal human experience of getting sidetracked following up on an irrelevant bit of data that happened to catch his eye during a search.

Akira was still undergoing this online rite of initiation—or wasting his time, depending on the point of view—when Sheryl finally woke up. She was still more or less hugging him, so her bleary stare caught him at extremely close quarters.

"If you're awake, get off me," Akira said curtly as he tried to push her away. He figured that she must have calmed down by that point.

Sheryl immediately tightened her grip, clinging to him desperately and looking on the point of tears.

"Help," she pleaded. Her feeble expression and teary eyes suggested that

she had no one else to turn to. “Please, help me.”

Akira was too confused to answer, but Sheryl took his silence for rejection and began to weep again. Her rest had restored just enough of her mental and physical strength to vent her fraught emotions in fresh sobs.

Akira knew how to handle people looking at him with animosity, contempt, and scorn—but a pleading, tearful gaze was unfamiliar territory. He felt slightly overwhelmed by Sheryl and blurted out an answer without thinking.

“O-Okay, I’ll help you.”

Sheryl stared for a moment, then smiled with relief as she closed her eyes. Her hands, which had been clinging to him as if he were her only handhold on the edge of a deadly precipice, relaxed their desperate grip. Without their support, her body leaned and sank against his. Even so, Sheryl kept her arms around Akira as she returned to sleep, this time with a peaceful look on her face.

“What was that about?” Akira cupped his head in his hands and sighed.

For the time being, Akira laid Sheryl down on the bed off to one side, then set about doing his regular weapon maintenance. Servicing his AAH had lately become part of his daily routine as well as his training, and today the process went without a hitch, as usual. He understood that the rifle was his lifeline, and as he painstakingly worked, he reminded himself that neglecting it would get him killed.

The AAH assault rifle was famous, and for good reason. Its sturdy construction, durability, reliability even in the face of poor conditions and rough handling, and relative ease of maintenance had made the weapon a favorite of hunters throughout the East for a century. Akira benefited from its features in a number of ways. Until just recently, he’d had little experience servicing and wielding firearms, but he was already fully competent to keep the AAH in working order. Without the rifle, he would never have survived this long—proof that its reputation was well-earned.

It might be a good idea to buy another one of these as a backup before I think about expanding my arsenal, he remarked.

Good idea. Carrying one in each hand is also an option, Alpha replied.

Akira pictured himself in the wasteland, guns akimbo as he stood his ground amid a ring of monsters. In his imagination, he had his arms

crossed, firing on the foes to his left with the AAH in his right hand and vice versa. But he wasn't looking to either side: his fierce gaze was focused straight ahead, intimidating his enemies. It was an amateur's vision—all style and no substance.

Nice thinking! he exclaimed, accidentally sending her his mental image.

You won't have much chance of hitting anything if you hold them that way, Alpha commented. *In the worst case, the recoil might even break your arms.*

W-Was it really that bad? Akira asked, a little sheepish when he realized that she had picked up on his fantasy.

You don't have anywhere near the physical strength you would need to support a rifle like that. If you tried to fire an AAH one-handed now, a warning shot would be the best you could hope for. A powered suit will let you suppress recoil even with a less-than-optimal stance, so don't even think about dual wielding until you have one.

Now I really *can't wait to get my hands on one.* Akira paused. *I won't get mixed up in any more weird messes before mine gets here, will I?*

Don't jinx it.

Yeah, right.

Akira returned his attention to his rifle. But as he continued working on it, his gaze wandered to Sheryl.

Alpha, what was all that *about, do you think?*

Her reactions didn't make much sense to me either, Alpha replied, shaking her head. *I think that she's exhausted after everything she's been through, but that's all I know. I wouldn't advise asking her too many questions about it when she wakes up.*

Her own conjectures about Sheryl's fluctuating moods she kept to herself. In her estimation, she had more to gain from keeping Akira in the dark.

Why don't you call it a day? she suggested. *I think the worst is behind you, but you ought to rest up in case anything else comes up tomorrow.*

Good idea. I'll turn in once I'm done.

Akira finished his maintenance, took a quick shower to assuage his longing for a bath, then pushed Sheryl—still lying in his bed—to one side and lay down. He didn't give much thought to the fact that they were side by side in bed. He wasn't about to sleep on the hard floor, especially since

he was paying for the room. Besides, whatever her reasons had been for clinging to him, she probably wouldn't complain about sleeping in the same bed after that. So he dismissed the issue and fell asleep.

◆

Sheryl woke earlier than Akira the next morning and dully looked around. When she spotted the boy lying beside her, she threw her arms around him with a look of groggy relief on her face and began dozing off again. But her sudden embrace woke Akira, who wasn't about to let her sleep in.

"Hey, wake up. Hands off."

As soon as the words left his mouth, he remembered what had happened the day before, and worried that she would have another meltdown. But the sleepy-looking Sheryl obediently released him, sat up, yawned widely, and gently rubbed her eyes. Then she looked him in the eye and smiled.

"Good morning," she said.

"M-Morning." Akira wasn't quite sure how to respond. Sheryl radiated confidence and composure, doing justice to her natural beauty. The distress that had marked her the day before was nowhere to be seen. Her transformation was so sudden and complete that it almost frightened him.

They ate breakfast together—just the usual bland, frozen fare, but you wouldn't have known it to look at their faces as they ate. Akira seemed a little overwhelmed by the change in Sheryl, while she remained calm but joyful. The contrast between them made it hard to believe that they were eating the same thing.

Sheryl paused her eating for a moment and bowed courteously. "Akira, I'm so sorry about yesterday. Thank you for putting up with me."

"Huh? Oh, don't sweat it," he replied without thinking. "Anyway, you seem fine now."

On reflection, Akira had realized that while Sheryl's gang had started the previous day's dispute, he himself was the one who had turned it into such a serious problem. That didn't bother him, but part of him did wonder if Sheryl was getting in a subtle dig at him—though another part was willing to take her thanks at face value. And a third part of him wasn't sure how she would react to yesterday's dangerous turn of events after she'd gotten him

involved. So he added noncommittally:

“A lot happened yesterday, but give me another call if anything else comes up.”

He was hoping to find out whether Sheryl regretted calling him in, but her reply caught him off guard.

“Then may I hug you now?” she said, smiling.

“What? Why?” Akira asked suspiciously. Her logic eluded him.

“Hugging you makes me feel safe. It really calms me down, you know.”

“No.”

“Why not? It’s not like it’ll hurt anything.”

“Yeah, it will. It’ll hurt my mobility and agility and stuff,” Akira retorted. “And we’re in the middle of breakfast. I’d have a hard time eating with you hanging off me.”

“I could always feed you.”

The offer hung in the air for an awkward moment. Finally, Akira said, “At least let me feed myself.”

“So I can hug you after you finish eating?” Sheryl refused to back down, and her smile never faltered. She leaned forward persistently and he recoiled slightly.

“Running a gang is really hard work,” she continued. “I think I ended up being such a handful yesterday because it left me so mentally exhausted. And hugging you will keep that from happening again. I’d say that’s a small price to pay to keep me out of your hair, wouldn’t you?”

Akira still hadn’t recovered from Sheryl’s transformation. He had a feeling that if he kept trying to brush her off gently, she would keep coming up with more justifications until he said yes. But a firm refusal might spark another outburst, and he didn’t want to deal with that. So, was letting her hug him the better option? He supposed so. And anyway, it wasn’t exactly uncomfortable.

“Fine. After I’m done eating,” he said.

“Thank you so much.” Sheryl beamed.

Alpha, for her part, realized that Sheryl had succeeded in guiding Akira’s thoughts, however trivially, and slightly upgraded her assessment of the threat the girl could pose.

After breakfast, Sheryl took him at his word. She faced Akira as he sat, straddled his legs, and wrapped her arms around his neck and back with the look of someone immersed in tranquility. Then she added another request.

“Would you wrap your arms around me too? And maybe stroke my head?”

“Yeah, I guess.” Akira sounded reluctant, but he did as Sheryl asked. She let out a muffled moan as bliss spread across her face.

What the hell am I doing? Akira wondered. His doubtful look turned into a frown when he noticed Alpha grinning significantly at him.

What? he demanded.

Nothing, she replied. *I was just thinking that she’s really warmed up to you.*

Are you implying I brought this on myself? How?

Who knows? I sure don’t. Still, she doesn’t look like she’s ever going to let you go. Do you want to start today’s lessons like this?

Akira released his hold on Sheryl, worried that he might actually end up having to study while she hugged him.

“Let go already,” he said. “I’ve got my own stuff to take care of.”

“All right,” Sheryl replied, a lonesome note in her voice. Reluctantly, she pulled herself away from Akira, who breathed a sigh of relief—part of him had expected her to put up a fight. Then suddenly she was all smiles.

“I’ll go back to my base now since I need to let everyone know how things turned out yesterday. Would you mind walking me there?”

“No problem.”

“Thanks so much.” Sheryl gave a polite bow, still beaming all the while.

She was walking on air all the way to her headquarters. Not even the suspicious looks that Akira shot her along the way could put a dent in her elation.

At the entrance to the base, she bowed again. “I really appreciate you taking the time to walk me home. I’ll call you if anything comes up, and if you ever feel like dropping by for no particular reason, I’d be delighted to see you.” She flashed a hopeful smile. “I’m going to do my best to not make any trouble for you. Still, running a gang really is hard work, so I’d appreciate it if you’d give me more chances to unwind like I did today.”

Akira considered for a moment. “Well, I’ll stop by if I find some free time.”

“Thank you so much. I’ll be waiting.”

Sheryl watched Akira until he was completely out of sight.

Akira groaned on his homeward journey. As he reflected on everything that had happened since the day before, he became painfully aware that Sheryl had thrown him off his stride.

Alpha, you think Sheryl was acting weird too, right? he asked. *I can’t really explain it, but she was, well, different.*

She’s not moping anymore, so why should you care?

True enough.

Alpha scowled. *If you ask me, you should be more concerned about staying out of trouble before your suit gets here. I hope you realize what a close call you had this time.*

I already said I’m sorry, Akira grumbled. *I didn’t expect it to turn into such a big deal either.*

Which was an excuse for the unforeseen circumstances, but not for how his actions had made them worse. Alpha realized that he didn’t even appreciate the distinction—a fresh reminder of how difficult Akira was to control. She looked almost stern as she drove her point home.

I’m not letting you outside until your suit arrives. I mean it this time.

I know, I know. I promise I’ll stay put this time. Akira hoped that his firm answer would help improve Alpha’s mood.

◆

Sheryl's young followers had passed a sleepless night. When she and Akira failed to return after their violent departure, most of the gang took a pessimistic view. Many who assumed Akira and Sheryl were dead, or that their conflict with Shijima's group was escalating into an all-out war, had already fled. Most of those who remained only did so because they had nowhere else to go if negotiations failed.

The next morning, the holdouts gathered in the meeting hall. A casual observer might have thought they had planned the gathering to discuss what to do, but such was not the case. They came together drawn by the mild relief provided by not being alone.

Then Sheryl returned. Her entrance sent a stir rippling through the crowd, but their shocked and nervous faces did nothing to dampen her confident smile.

"I just got back," she announced. "Did anything happen while I was out?"

"*You're* asking *us*?!" the children shouted. "Tell us what went down!"

"It's fine," Sheryl replied, unperturbed despite being—in a sense—surrounded. "I talked things out with Shijima and his crew, so you've got nothing to worry about."

The children began to buzz again. They had been hoping for that answer, but it also came as a total shock. They all started shouting at once, hounding Sheryl for details.

"A-Are we really in the clear?! Where's Akira?! He went with you, right?! Did they kill him?!"

"Did you seriously work something out with Shijima?! After we killed one of his guys?! How'd you pull *that* off?!"

"What about their demands?! Do we gotta hand over the base or some turf or something?!"

Sheryl smiled reassuringly at the crowd. "Akira's not even scratched. We're not giving this base or any of our territory to Shijima, and they've agreed to be on friendly terms with us from now on. It's all settled, so don't worry."

The Sheryl before them now was clearly confident and composed, and the tone of her voice rang with sincerity. The kids weren't fully convinced,

but they did start to calm down.

"Now, what are you all doing hanging out here?" Sheryl continued in a harsher tone. "I know I gave you all jobs cleaning or patrolling or gathering scrap. Are you already finished?"

"N-No," someone responded, "we figured we had no time to worry about stuff like that."

"And what about everyone who's not here?" Sheryl demanded. "Did you get them to take over your shifts?"

The children exchanged looks. Then one of them hesitantly replied, "The others probably ran for it."

"Oh, okay. I'll have to redo the work schedule, then," Sheryl said lightly. She had expected this, and she kept her cool even after calculating the number of deserters based on those in attendance. In fact, she was glad to have such an early warning of who would flee in the face of a little trouble.

"Erio, take a group and track down everyone who ran," she ordered calmly. "You don't need to bring them back, but make sure they return any guns or food they took with them."

"Huh? Sure. I'm on it."

"Aricia, talk to everyone and figure out exactly who left and who stayed. Report to me once you're done."

"What? Oh, right."

"Everyone else, you know your jobs."

The kids weren't sure how to react. Some exchanged looks, others had more questions, and still others hadn't yet wrapped their minds around what had happened or were just staring blankly into space. But no one sprang into action.

"Get moving!" Sheryl barked, scowling.

Instantly, they all scrambled to obey. Satisfied, Sheryl returned to her private room.

Erio and Aricia looked at each other in surprise, a feeling shared by the rest of the gang.

"Hey, doesn't Sheryl seem kind of, I dunno, scary now?" Erio asked, looking baffled and a bit worried.

Aricia was equally perplexed at Sheryl's unflappable good cheer after the chaos of the previous day. Nevertheless, she gave Erio a small smile, to reassure herself as well as him. "Maybe you imagined it. She just looked

self-assured to me."

"You think so?" Erio responded. "Guess you're right. Anyway, she says everything's fine, and I guess I'd rather have her looking confident than not after everything that went down."

"Exactly. Now, let's get to work before the boss gets mad at us."

"Right, good idea."

They pulled themselves together and set about their tasks.

Back in her room, Sheryl was cheerfully plotting out her gang's future. She had always been a bright child, employing her intellect to secure a decent life for herself under Syberg through skillful maneuvering. But by the same token, she wasn't cut out for combat. Slum life had afforded her numerous opportunities to get dragged into some level of fighting, but she had always weathered them by hiding behind someone else.

The collapse of Syberg's gang had thrust her abruptly into a world where death was always close at hand. She'd lacked the necessary period to adjust or prepare. That world had been too harsh for her.

Days of never-ending strain, pressure, and mortal terror had constantly strangled Sheryl's spirit. The stress had been more than her mind could endure. A web of cracks had ruptured her self-image, until at last the coup de grâce had shattered her.

The scattered fragments of her heart had sought something to cling to. When they found their new support, they had flocked to it, and her psyche had shaped itself into a new form around that pillar. Her new focus had begun radiating healing into the gaps between her unstable collection of loose shards. Salvation, relief, and dependence had securely fastened her together, transforming the pieces of her identity as they did so. Through a process that had begun when she met Akira, the mind called Sheryl had been rebuilt into a new entity that bore only a nominal resemblance to her former self.

Previously, Sheryl's fear of the world had rendered her incapable of putting her insight to good use. But with her newfound sense of safety and her renewed confidence, her mind was clear. She felt as though idling gears in her head had suddenly engaged, allowing her to think on a new level.

And so Sheryl thought, reflecting on her recent actions—a mess of careless, flawed, and foolish ideas—and found endless room for

improvement. Her mistakes were humbling, but she resolved to learn from them.

Potential plans flooded her mind. She considered, reconsidered, and revised each one.

She pondered what the future held for her gang. It needed to keep growing and keep succeeding. For her. For Akira. To build a world that would make both of them happy, now that they were equally essential to who she was.

As Sheryl dreamed alone of a hopeful future, a bewitching smile crossed her face.

Chapter 21: Headgear, Intuition, and the Arcane

When Akira got Shizuka's message that his powered suit had arrived at her store, he released all his pent-up impatience into a broad grin. He dropped everything, interrupting one of the lessons that had become part of his daily routine, and hurriedly dressed. As soon as he was ready, he left his hotel and set off for Cartridge Freak at a brisk trot.

Shizuka spotted his barely suppressed excitement the moment he walked in the door. Seeing how eagerly he had been looking forward to his new suit brought a smile to her face.

"Welcome," she greeted him. "Your order is ready. Follow me."

She ushered Akira straight into her storeroom. There, standing out amid the clutter, rested a sturdy structure that resembled a cross between a gun rack and a clothing stand. Akira beamed when he saw the brand-new powered suit hanging on it and knew at once that it was his.

The suit was made of a supple material, tinted a gray so dark that it was almost black. A metal framework spread across its surface, originating in a spinelike support on the suit's back and tracing the lines of the human skeleton to the tips of all four limbs. It didn't include a helmet or any other headgear.

Akira paced around the rack, staring at his suit in evident fascination. Shizuka found his childlike behavior charming.

"This is what you asked for," she announced, "a TLT type-C powered suit. The manufacturer calls it Chiron."

The suit was two product generations out-of-date, although its hardware specs didn't lag too far behind current models. But because support for its basic control software had ended, there were no performance-enhancing updates in its future. Volunteers sometimes developed improved software for such abandoned products and released it via the internet. Some of those homebrew updates could wring significant performance boosts out of dated

hardware. Naturally, they didn't come with any warranty either, and a coding error could even twist an unlucky user's joints in the wrong direction. So, as Shizuka warned him strenuously, she absolutely did not recommend them.

Akira nodded along to Shizuka's explanation, but his gaze never left his suit. He looked like an excited child with a new toy. Yielding to his curiosity, he touched its surface, feeling the numerous thin, hard supports that had been woven into the synthetic fibers. He ran his hand along the wires and found that they connected to the metal exoskeleton. The framework was softer than he had expected—it felt like metal, but it bent like rubber when he pressed on it.

"Sh-Shizuka," he said, hurriedly withdrawing his hand, "is it supposed to be this squishy?"

"Don't worry. It softens when it's not running to make it easier to put on and take off," the shopkeeper reassured him. She looked amused at his reactions. "Now, don't just stand there staring. Try it on! I'm going to rerecord your physical data for the initial setup, so strip down like you did when I measured you."

Shizuka scanned Akira's body as before, then moved behind the suit and transmitted his data to its control system via her handheld terminal. The suit began to adjust itself: its sleeves, inseam, and torso slowly shrank down to Akira's proportions.

Akira let out a muted cry of surprise as he watched it change. Then, with Shizuka's help, he donned the newly resized suit. The flexible metallic exoskeleton didn't get in his way while he was putting it on or when he tried moving around in it. But its weight was another story. Although the suit's mass had distributed itself over his body when it adapted to his build, it still weighed so heavily on him that he couldn't imagine working in it for long without running out of stamina.

Shizuka looked him up and down and nodded. "There. You look great."

"Thank you," Akira replied, happy but flustered.

Looking good! Alpha chimed in. *I think I'm in love!*

Shut up.

Why are you so mean to me? she demanded, lamenting Akira's curt dismissal of her compliment.

Because you always sound like you're making fun of me.

Alpha continued to sulk, but Akira ignored her.

Meanwhile, Shizuka moved on to checking the powered suit's functionality. "Try booting up your suit now. The activation switch is near your waist. I don't think you'll have any problems, but kill the power immediately if anything feels wrong."

"I understand."

Akira switched on his powered suit. He felt the exoskeleton and the metallic fibers woven into the fabric stiffen, and the weight disappeared. The heavy burden suddenly lifted, causing him to stumble and cry out in surprise. He hastily steadied himself, then began flexing his limbs, startled by the difference that activating the suit had made.

The Chiron didn't just support its own weight; it also moved its joints in concert with its wearer. Akira felt weightless as a result. Shizuka looked him over and decided that his suit was functioning normally.

"It looks like it booted up without any issues. Try moving slowly for a little while as you get used to your enhanced strength," she advised. Many first-timers had difficulty keeping up with the sudden boost to their physical abilities. "I'd like to tell you to pick up one of those big guns to test out your new suit, but I don't want you breaking any of my merchandise, so you'll have to make do with lifting chunks of rubble out in the desert."

She also added a few more warnings. "Be careful when you pick up your guns too. It's easy to crush them by accident when you don't know your own strength. And while the metal supports harden while the suit's active, they're only meant to support heavy firearms and armor plates. Don't count on them to protect you from bullets or monster attacks unless you add armor."

Akira nodded. "I understand. I'll be careful."

"The accessories are in that box. There's a spare energy pack, a service kit, and a simple paper instruction manual. I think it also gives you an address to download a manual that you can view on your terminal. Make sure you read the instructions." All too often, users assumed that a powered suit would be easy enough to figure out through practice alone. "I think that's about it. Do you have any questions for me?"

Akira considered. "Now that you mention it," he remarked, "don't powered suits come with helmets or anything?"

"Headgear for powered suits and body armor is usually optional,"

Shizuka replied, looking slightly apologetic. “Did you prefer a helmet? I’m sorry, I should have checked.”

“No, I just thought it might make sense,” Akira hurriedly explained. “I’m not unhappy or anything. If I’d needed one, I would’ve said something when I talked to you before. Don’t sweat it.”

“Really? Thank goodness.” Shizuka smiled, reassured. Akira felt relieved that he had managed to avoid hurting her feelings.

“You asked if I prefer a helmet,” he added, curious. “Does that mean some hunters don’t?”

“Yes, and a lot of them. That’s why headgear is usually treated as an extra.” Some hunters wore head-mounted scanners with their powered suits, and so considered helmets unnecessary. Others did their best to avoid any kind of headgear for personal reasons. Both types of customer were common enough for suit dealers to have taken notice.

“Is it really that common?” Akira asked. The explanation didn’t make much sense to him. “Wearing a helmet seems like it’d be safer.”

“Quite common. You don’t see Elena or Sara wearing full-face helmets, do you?”

Shizuka was right, now that Akira thought of it. He didn’t remember seeing helmets on any of the men who had attacked Elena and Sara in the ruins either. But that only deepened his curiosity.

“You’re right,” he said. “But why?”

“Well, it’s kind of arcane.”

“Arcane?”

“That’s right. Would you like me to tell you more?”

“Yes, please.”

Akira’s curiosity was all the excuse Shizuka needed to launch into her explanation.

Powered suit manufacturers toiled away day in and day out, developing products to satisfy the high-ranking hunters who had the same kind of disposable income as corporations. Their efforts had yielded a shockingly high-spec, full-face helmet—light, thin, able to withstand a direct hit from an artillery shell, a 360-degree internal display, and a sound-enhancement system. It didn’t even feel constricting to wear. All those features made the helmet’s price skyrocket, but it remained well within the means of top hunters.

Yet certain hunters refused to adopt the product. Naturally, the manufacturers had tried to learn why.

"What do you think they found out, Akira?" Shizuka asked. "It wasn't a money problem, of course."

Akira pondered, but he came up blank. So he gave up and turned to her for help.

"I've got no clue."

"They said that wearing helmets like that clouded their intuition, if you can believe it."

"Their what?" Akira said. He hadn't expected this answer.

"Intuition," Shizuka repeated, smiling. She had expected exactly this reaction. "Apparently, those hunters wanted to keep their instincts sharp, even at the cost of giving up the defense and utility they'd get out of a high-end helmet. I'm confident in my own intuition, so I can kind of see where they're coming from."

"Hm, I'm not sure I do." Akira frowned, unconvinced.

"Well, those senses vary a lot from person to person, so there are plenty of skeptics." As the possessor of a keen intuition herself, Shizuka was not among them. "On the other hand, a lot of people think that they should go with their gut when it comes to their own gear. It all comes down to individual choice, so it's not really an issue."

Shizuka's tone became conspiratorial, as if she were telling a ghost story. "The problems arise when private military companies go to outfit their troops. The person in charge of procuring equipment for one unit decided that they didn't believe in 'that sort of superstitious nonsense' and made high-performance headgear mandatory. What do you think happened then?"

"Wh-What?"

"They handed out some really high-end headgear to try to quiet any complaints, but the unit's overall casualty rate still went up."

Akira couldn't hide his astonishment. Shizuka smiled, satisfied at his reaction.

"There's no convincing evidence," she continued. "People avoid headgear because of vague gut feelings. Still, it's tough to argue with hard numbers like casualty statistics. So, that's why people call it 'arcane.'"

"So, uh, should I steer clear of helmets, then?" Akira asked hesitantly.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t know either,” Shizuka replied, though she smiled reassuringly. “Like I said earlier, intuition plays a role, so you’ll have to make that choice for yourself.”

“Really? Huh, I’m not sure I get it.” Akira groaned.

Despite his obvious perplexity, Shizuka couldn’t bring herself to simply tell him what to do. Some hunters did favor full-face helmets. Others took the wrong lessons from the information that Shizuka had just relayed and died as a result of neglecting headgear.

“Veteran hunters tell me that they don’t feel right unless they have their headgear exactly how they like it. You might come to understand that feeling too one of these days.”

She only spoke to ease his mind, but after considering a moment, he grinned as if he had come to a decision.

“All right,” he said. “I haven’t got the money for extras anyway, so I’ll work on being a helmet-hater for now.”

Shizuka beamed back at him. “Sure, no need to stress yourself out worrying. And I can order optional parts on their own, so let me know if you change your mind.”

“Thanks.”

“And call me if your suit malfunctions or has any initial defects. I can send it out for repairs from here, but remember that, what with shipping and everything, it will take at least a month. Oh, and do you want to take it off before you leave? I’ll give you a hand if you do.”

“No, I’ll wear it home,” Akira replied.

“Okay. In that case, either turn off the strength enhancement or switch your suit into home mode before you leave the store. It can be dangerous otherwise.”

Akira followed Shizuka’s advice and powered off his suit. Instantly, its weight returned, dragging down his body. Making it back to his hotel in this state would be a challenge, he realized, so he switched the suit to home mode. He still felt the weight, but not enough to keep him from moving normally.

“I tried to select a suit that matches your requests as closely as possible,” Shizuka continued. “I’m sure you’ll find things you don’t like once you get some real use out of it, but I pray that it will satisfy you for now.”

“Don’t worry—I love it. Thank you so much for picking it out for me.”

“Just doing my job! Feel free to tell me if you have any complaints. I’ll do what I can.”

“Thanks. I’ll go to you for more advice if anything comes up.”

Shizuka beamed at Akira, thoroughly satisfied.

“Oh, I almost forgot,” she added. “Don’t forget that you’ll have to pay for your suit’s energy on top of your ammunition from now on. If you can’t use it because it ran out of power, you’ll have bought it for nothing. It was a big purchase, so always keep it in working order.”

“You bet. I’ll be careful.”

“And one last thing—don’t treat that powered suit as a license to be reckless. Is that clear?”

“Of course. Thank you again for everything.” Akira bobbed his head.

“Don’t mention it.” Shizuka chuckled. “Now I can recommend guns that were too heavy for you to lift before. I’m looking forward to your future purchases.”

“I’d love to make a killing so I don’t disappoint you, but I’m trying not to take too many risks, so give me time.” Akira grinned jokingly, gave a small bow, and left the store.

◆

Once Shizuka had seen Akira off, she stepped back behind her counter.

“All else aside,” she muttered with feeling, “he works fast. He just bought his first AAH the other day, and now he’s already got a powered suit.”

Akira’s gear had improved considerably in a brief span of time. Even in Shizuka’s wide experience, he was an outlier.

“He was lucky enough to get rescued by Elena and Sara when he was in a tight spot too. He’s got a bright future as a hunter ahead of him if he keeps this up.” A worried look flashed across Shizuka’s face, but she quickly dismissed it. “I think so, anyway.”

The faster someone raced down the road to success, the more likely they were to get tunnel vision and make mistakes—and the worse the damage they would suffer when they did. Shizuka had driven away the thought that had popped into her mind before it left her mouth, fearful that a careless word might become reality.

◆

Back in his hotel room, Akira was happily gazing at his new powered suit, which hung on its special rack.

"Now that I've got this thing, I can finally get back to relic hunting, right?"

After the five hundred thousand aurum he'd paid to Shijima, he was running out of funds. If he didn't do something soon, he would get kicked out of even these cheap, cramped lodgings. He wanted to get back to making money, back to the luxury of a room with a bath.

But Alpha swiftly crushed his hopes. *We won't be going to the ruins for a little while yet.*

"What? But isn't it safe to leave the city again now that I've got a powered suit?" Akira asked.

We'll be going to the wasteland, but not to any ruins—that would be too risky. I have resolved to take every precaution against your bad luck, even if it means going a little overboard protecting you. Alpha spoke dramatically, as if she was steeling herself to face a powerful foe.

"R-Really?" Akira said, a little rattled by her theatrics. "If that's how you want it, I won't argue. But what's your plan? I won't even be able to afford this room soon."

Don't worry. Completing jobs for the Hunter Office will suffice for you to get by for a little while until you raise your rank enough that they'll let you rent a desert off-roader. That's our next goal.

"A car, huh? Why should I be in such a rush to get one of those?"

Because running from packs of monsters on foot is kind of hard.

Akira could see her point, but he still had mixed feelings. He didn't like taking it for granted that he'd run into another horde.

Once that's out of the way, we'll head back into the ruins for relics, Alpha added. *And don't worry about choosing what jobs to take—I'll handle that.*

Akira considered for a moment. "Well, if you say so. I'll leave you to it."

Now, call it a day and get some rest. In the meantime, I'll take care of calibrating your suit. You'll have a full day of training tomorrow, since I need you to at least get a basic feel for fighting in it. We'll start taking jobs

the day after that.

"I thought Shizuka already tuned up the suit for me," Akira said, confused.

Alpha looked smug. *She only did the initial setup. I'm going to go all out customizing it, so that you can get the most bang for your buck from my top-of-the-line support. Just hook it up to your data terminal and rest easy while I take it from there.*

Akira fished a cable out of his suit's maintenance kit and hooked up the suit to his terminal. Strings of letters and numbers, images, and patterns that meant nothing to him immediately began flowing across the terminal's screen. But he remembered seeing this happen the last time, so he let it go and left Alpha to do her thing while he relaxed.

Since his terminal was in use and Alpha was busy setting up his suit, he grabbed a notebook and something to write with and began reviewing his lessons. As he studied, he recalled something that Shizuka had said.

"Hey, Alpha, you remember what Shizuka told me about how wearing a helmet can mess with your intuition?" he asked. "Does stuff like that really happen?"

Absolutely. Alpha spoke as if Akira were the odd one for even questioning such an obvious fact.

"You sound awfully sure," he responded, a little taken aback at her tone. "Even Shizuka called it 'arcane.'"

A lot of factors are involved: reduced quality of necessary sensory information, the resulting misapprehensions and errors of judgment, the loss of unconscious perceptions, interference with subconscious communications, and so on, Alpha explained. *People only call it "arcane" because science currently isn't able to analyze all that.*

Akira's expression went past surprise to utter bewilderment. "Any chance you could simplify that for me?" he asked.

Sure, think of it like a low-resolution image.

Alpha began a thought experiment, and following her instructions, Akira imagined two different photographs of a single location—one crisp and the other blurry, but both clear enough for a viewer to recognize them as pictures of the same place. The blurry image would obviously preserve less information than the crisp one. And the same held true when comparing any photograph to the actual landscape. Even the highest-resolution recording—

indistinguishable from reality to the naked eye—provided nowhere near the amount of data that seeing the location firsthand did.

A wraparound video display in a full-face helmet ran into the same problem. In fact, even goggles that seemed transparent at first glance could still cause information loss—including warning signs of potential danger. Without realizing it, the hunter lost the ability to detect threats on an unconscious level. And the issue wasn't unique to sight—it applied to any sensory perception involving the head. The result? A loss of intuition.

Akira listened to Alpha's explanation, looking completely lost.

Have you ever felt like someone was staring at you from behind and then turned around and seen that you were right? Alpha continued. *Some people have an especially keen sense for that sort of thing.*

She added that, for most people, an experience like that could be chalked up to coincidence or an overactive imagination. But there were rare exceptions. Somehow, some people could detect gazes, a power which could not be ascribed to sight, hearing, touch, taste, or smell.

Such ultra-perceptive individuals might possess some kind of additional sensory organ, even if they weren't aware of it. Perhaps they unwittingly made use of a relic to detect another's presence, or perhaps their Old World ancestors had integrated such technology into their bodies. If the organ responsible was in the head, covering it with a helmet could reduce its effectiveness.

But Akira's expression grew even more confused, unable to wrap his mind around Alpha's lengthy explanation. She pressed on nonetheless.

You can see and hear me, but only because we're exchanging information back and forth. As I've mentioned a bit before, your brain has that power.

Alpha then listed many other examples of people who seemed to communicate supernaturally with someone or something else: mysterious mental communication between twins, or premonitions that a distant loved one was in danger. Such senses might indicate a real, unconscious power of some kind to exchange information, even when it failed to reach the level of conscious, deliberate conversation. And if something in the head handled that function, head coverings could block the signal, rendering the person in question less sensitive to imminent danger.

Akira just became even more bewildered as Alpha delved into technical

subjects that only a specialist would have understood. He struggled to stop his brain from rejecting these baffling new ideas outright.

So someone with a sharp intuition, Alpha went on, *can easily draw information from all of those various subconscious processes and use it to make decisions.*

Then she asked Akira to suppose that a hunter had honed those senses unconsciously, without realizing it, just by trying to survive the deadly threats of their job. What would happen to them if they covered their head and thus lost their access to the information that they needed to detect threats? It would be like suddenly closing their eyes. And the more they had relied on their intuition, the more likely they would die if they engaged monsters in that state.

Alpha paused, smiled, and asked, *Understand now?*

Akira's mind was in a whirl, but he still tried to come up with an answer. "So you're saying that if I put on a helmet, I'd risk missing things I'd normally notice or not be able to talk to you anymore?"

Alpha looked surprised, then resumed her cheerful grin. *That's a good enough takeaway. I can't let you equip anything that will hinder my ability to support you, no matter how good its specs are.*

"But how will we find out what gear is a problem?" Akira asked.

Don't worry about that. I can tell right away, and I'll let you know.

"Okay, got it." Akira was relieved to learn that some shady accessory wouldn't deprive him of Alpha's help without him realizing it.

So, was that explanation clear enough? Alpha asked. *Would you like me to simplify it even more for you?*

"Nah, I'm good for now. Tell me the details some other time, when we cover that stuff in lessons."

Really? Well, let me know if you ever want to learn more.

"S-Sure."

Akira had a feeling that further explanation would only lead endlessly to more details about subjects he could barely make sense of. Alpha, naturally, saw right through his motives. While he tried to change the subject, she continued to study him from behind her smile, just as she had since their first encounter. From his expressions, she deduced the psychology that underlay them, and from those changes in his mental state, she learned much about the core qualities and tendencies of his personality, preferences,

and insecurities, as well as their sources.

Chapter 22: The True Power of the Suit

The day after he got his powered suit, Akira returned to the desert to practice using it. He cut a dangerous figure in it, seeming more and more a part of the monster-infested wasteland. With his new suit, anti-monster assault rifle, and backpack stuffed with ammunition and medical supplies, he looked a proper hunter—no longer wet behind the ears.

Alpha, on the other hand, looked entirely out of place in her white dress: glossy, high quality, translucent. Light filtered through the sheer fabric, creating shadows that hinted at her bare form beneath. Akira wished she would make more of an effort to blend in, but he kept his opinion to himself. He decided, albeit without evidence, that she probably had a good reason for her choice of attire, just as she had for the white dress she'd worn previously and for her nudity when they'd first met. More than that, he also worried that a careless word from him might provoke her to change into something distracting. This was his first wasteland training session in some time, and he didn't want any extra trouble. So he told himself that at least she wasn't naked and held his peace.

Akira, it's time to start training in your suit, she announced with a smile.

"I'm ready." Akira moved to boot up his suit, but it activated before he could touch it. Startled, he glanced at Alpha, and one look at her smug grin told him that this was her handiwork.

"So, what do you want me to do first?" he asked.

Start by walking to that spot. Alpha pointed into the distance.

Akira turned to look and saw a floating arrow—one of Alpha's AR images—pointing to a patch of barren desert one hundred meters away. That sort of thing no longer surprised him, and he immediately set off as directed. He reached his destination without difficulty.

Next, head there.

Akira obediently proceeded to the next point, and then the next. After about ten times, he naturally began to have doubts.

"Alpha, am I supposed to be keeping a sharper lookout or holding my

gun ready to fire or something while I walk?" he asked. "Or are we just making sure my suit moves all right before we train for real?"

No, your training is already underway, Alpha replied. *As is my data collection.*

"Even though all I'm doing is walking?" Akira looked puzzled.

Alpha gave him a knowing smile. *I suppose you'll have a hard time really appreciating my support until you give this a try without it.*

"What support? I'm just walking. Are you already doing something?"

Alpha looked mischievous. *You're about to find out. Walk to the spot I'm pointing to again—but this time without my help. I'll raise your suit's output to make it more obvious. Then you'll see just how much my support is worth!*

Akira found Alpha's look unsettling, but he still stepped forward. Or tried to—and went sprawling. The moment he attempted to walk, his back foot pressed down with so much force that it kicked up a cloud of dirt behind him, and the recoil sent him tumbling to the ground.

He scrambled to pick himself up, still reeling in surprise, and thrust his right hand downward for leverage. But far from supporting his weight, his hand tore up the ground, sinking in up to the wrist. Frantically, he planted his left hand beside his right to help pull it free, and the force of the action flung him onto his back. When he tensed up and tried to roll back into a prone position, his momentum sent him tumbling and flailing. He put all his strength into his legs and struggled to rise once more, but they gouged fresh furrows in the earth, and he fell again.

After that, Akira moved slowly, with the utmost care, and somehow got back on his feet. But no sooner did he try to walk again than he lost his balance. Recovering and stopping his fall took everything he had. Then, moving slowly to avoid another tumble, he turned to look at Alpha.

Now do you understand? she said cheerfully. *Even walking normally is a challenge when you don't know how to handle your enhanced strength.* So much was true: Akira's inability to manage a single step made it crystal clear how much he owed to Alpha's help. *You're normally able to get around without falling over because you unconsciously adjust your walk to your regular weight and strength. Learning to do the same thing with your powered suit on is a vital training exercise.* Smirking, she added, *I've restored my support now, so it's safe to walk again.*

Akira took a cautious step forward. When he realized he could move normally again, he frowned and said, “I can’t even walk without your help, huh? Is this what everybody’s first time in a powered suit is like? I can’t even move right—and I’m supposed to keep training until I can fight in this thing? I might actually be better off without it.”

That depends on the suit’s performance. High-end models come with excellent control software, so many of them modulate their output to let their wearers move normally right off the bat.

She explained that the more power a suit could generate, the more precise its motion compensation needed to be. As a result, many models advertised the quality of their autobalancers. A suit with the strength to send a tank flying would usually do the same to its wearer if it lacked the control systems to offset the resulting backlash. In a sense, a wearer needed to consider how easily they could move in a suit more than the brute strength it provided them.

Akira listened with interest. Then a thought struck him. “Does that mean that you’re handling all that motion assistance for me?”

You bet I am.

“Wow.” Having felt firsthand how much difference Alpha’s help made, Akira was not just surprised but genuinely impressed.

You haven’t seen anything yet, Alpha said, beaming with satisfaction. *You’ll need to work even harder if you want a taste of how much I can really do for you.*

“Yes, ma’am!”

The training continued. Again and again, Alpha issued directions, and Akira carried them out. Her assignments began with slow, simple movements, then turned into a graduated set of tests for his suit-enhanced strength. First she had him move at a slow walk, then at a trot, a jog, and finally an all-out run. He practiced recovering quickly from a fall. While doing a handstand, he jumped using only his arms. He made sharp turns while sprinting at top speed. Then Alpha demanded maneuvers that would ordinarily have required long periods of training, given his suit’s specs; Akira, of course, had no way of knowing that as he performed them. He didn’t even think to question the absurdly high standard of motion assistance that made such feats possible.

With a morning of training behind him, Akira paused for a light lunch, which consisted of something resembling an over-hard cookie. The snack, made for hunters on the go, was designed to be cheap, nutrient-rich, and a convenient antidote for hunger—taste was a secondary concern. Even so, as Akira bit into it, he was startled to realize that part of him longed for something more palatable.

I've always been happy enough just to put food in my stomach, he reflected, amused at himself. *I guess I've gotten pretty used to luxuries lately.* But even as he chuckled at himself, he was glad for the reminder of how far his standard of living had risen.

"What's the plan for the afternoon, Alpha?" he asked. "More exercise?"

Target practice, then close-quarters combat drills, she replied.

"Fighting up close? Like, er, punching and kicking and stuff?"

Comprehensive close-quarters combat training, including firearms. We'll start with melee combat against human opponents. You'll be going up against me in a simulated fight.

Akira looked confused. "How's that supposed to work? I mean, I can't touch you, right?"

Had Alpha gained a physical body while he wasn't looking? He reached out to test his doubts, but his hand passed through her as always. He felt relieved that she was still incorporeal, but he also remained perplexed.

You'll understand soon enough, she informed him with a smile. *Look forward to the surprise.*

Akira was curious, but as Alpha didn't seem inclined to tell him anything else yet, he returned to his lunch looking bemused.

After eating, Akira started target practice as planned. He found it difficult to adjust to the feel of shooting while wearing the suit, especially the odd sensation of gripping his rifle through thick gloves, so he began with firing at pebbles rather than simulated monsters.

He held his rifle steady, took careful aim at a small stone one hundred meters away, and pulled the trigger. His bullet found its mark and sent the rock flying. Pleased at his initial success, he smiled slightly as he painstakingly lined up his next shot. He landed another hit, then another and another.

"Whoa! I'm on fire today!" he exclaimed, satisfied with his results.

In that case, let's start increasing the distance to your targets, Alpha cheerfully suggested.

"Sure thing."

Akira took even greater care as he lined up a more distant pebble in his sights and pulled the trigger. His bullet struck its mark dead-on. He kept targeting rocks farther and farther away, yet landed each shot with precision. Over time, his good mood gradually gave way to confusion.

His suit might have increased his accuracy, giving him the strength to suppress recoil like never before. Or so he told himself to keep his doubts at bay while he aimed and fired. But after a while he was shooting at pebbles too far away for that explanation to hold water, and yet his bullets went on striking with unnerving accuracy. They almost seemed drawn to their targets. And when he scored a hit on a stone five hundred meters away, his suspicions approached certainty.

"You're doing something, aren't you?" he asked, turning to look at Alpha.

I'm giving you my full support, she answered, beaming.

"That figures." Akira hadn't suddenly become a master sharpshooter. He'd guessed as much, but he still scowled.

After you take aim, I do some fine-tuning using your suit. I've also been adjusting your stance and center of gravity when you fire. And by moving its joints ever so slightly, I almost completely absorb the recoil.

"You can do all that? Wow." Then a thought occurred to him. "Hang on. Does that mean I don't have to bother with target practice anymore?"

It does not. The more precisely you aim, the fewer adjustments I'll need to make. And sometimes you'll have to fight without your suit or in places where I can't help you as much. So your marksmanship training is here to stay.

"All right, that makes sense."

In fact, assume that your exercises will get more intense now that I can control your suit to drill proper posture into you more efficiently.

Akira's powered suit gave him the physical strength to fire his rifle from a less-than-stable stance without reducing his accuracy significantly. He could now land hits when he was off-balance, or running, or even when his target was out of sight, if only he had the skill to pull it off. And one day, Alpha assured him, he would learn to do all that without her help. Akira

balked at the thought of how much training that would take, but Alpha responded with a confident smile.

Not to worry. If you end up too exhausted to move, I'll simply take control of your suit and walk you home. So relax and focus on training.

That frightened Akira. "Don't go too hard on me," he pleaded with an apprehensive grin.

In short, I'll be able to help you aim from now on, Alpha said in a more serious tone. *Now that you appreciate how I can be of service to you via your powered suit, I have a question for you.*

"Yeah?"

Right now, I'm only controlling your suit to make slight adjustments to your movements. I'm assisting with actions you choose, and I'm not hindering you or doing anything against your will. But if you wish, I can take complete control of your suit's movements. That would allow me to move your body as I please, regardless of what you intend to do.

Alpha hadn't revealed the limits to her current level of support until Akira had experienced its benefits. But now she shared some of the risks involved, leading him down a certain line of thought.

Of course, I promise not to do anything that will go against your interests. Nevertheless, my control has considerable pros and equally significant cons, so listen closely and think carefully before you give me your answer.

Alpha's businesslike tone reminded Akira of the time she had asked for his permission to skirt a bunch of annoying regulations. He decided that her question was probably important.

"All right," he said, giving her his full attention. "Start with the good parts."

If I take full control of your suit, I can push its performance to the absolute limit. You'll be able to pull off some nearly superhuman feats. Running along the edge of a roof while firing, guns akimbo, and accurately taking down monsters closing in on you from either side with your eyes closed, for example. Akira had just experienced what it was like to do similar amazing stunts, and now she was promising even greater powers—provided he entrusted her with total control. *And in close-quarters combat, my support will allow you to fight like a veteran. I can detect threats in your blind spots and move you to evade them or launch an effective*

counterattack.

"Sounds like all upsides to me," Akira said. "What's the catch?"

To start with, there's the revulsion you'll experience when your body moves on its own. And because I'll be using brute force to control your body, it'll be under a lot of strain. As she spoke, Alpha blurred the line between mental and physical burden, clouding his judgment. *And because you'll be matching my movements, rather than the other way around, you'll delay your reactions and make things harder on your body if you reflexively try to fight against your suit. You might even break a bone sometimes.*

Her explanation over, Alpha waited for an answer.

Akira turned the matter over in his mind. *I feel like the pros outweigh the cons*, he thought to himself. *Still, if she's making such a big deal out of this choice, there's gotta be more to it.*

But try as he might, he couldn't figure out what that might be.

"Can I try it out first?" he asked at last.

Of course, Alpha replied.

"Then let's do that."

All right. I'm going to operate your suit, starting with a walk and then slowly picking up speed. Stop me right away if it hurts.

"Got it."

Here goes.

Akira's powered suit began to move on its own, forcing him to walk. That startled him, but nothing worse happened. He wasn't in any pain, despite having his legs shoved around somewhat roughly. As he adapted his movements to the suit's, the burden on his body decreased. The suit broke into a run, which should have felt like greater exertion to him—yet it supported his body so that he felt the exercise was less strenuous than ever.

Is this it? Akira thought. *Why'd she have to make it sound like such a big d—?*

And then he noticed his speed. While he had felt relaxed, his suit kept upping its pace. By the time he realized it and started panicking, his legs were already pumping faster than he could ever have willed them to. Now they could no longer keep up with the movements of the suit, which clamped down on them with every stride. The pain mounted steadily. The shock of his feet being slammed into the ground made his bones creak with every step. His limbs cried out in protest at the force with which they were

being swung.

Akira was now kicking up a cloud of dust as he tore across the wasteland as fast as any car. As he ran, his expression twisted with shock, fear, and pain. As soon as he got ahold of himself, he yelled, “Stop! That’s enough!”

His suit began to decelerate gradually, minimizing the strain on his body. Once his pace had dropped sufficiently, he regained control. He eventually came to a halt and fell to his knees, gasping for air.

Just a little faster, and you could run away from a monster swarm, Alpha informed him. *It may be painful, but think how helpful it could be in the broad scheme of things. So, what do you say?*

Akira finally understood why she had told him to consider carefully. “Please don’t do that unless you really have to,” he said. “And warn me ahead of time if you can.”

I read you loud and clear. Just remember you consented to this.

“Is this more of that ‘red tape’ you told me about?”

Exactly. I need explicit permission to control a suit in a way that deviates from the wearer’s intent. But don’t worry—I won’t try any funny business. Now, we’ll practice some close-quarters combat. But take a break first. We’ll start once you can move around again.

“Sure thing,” Akira panted as he lay down on the ground. Being jerked around by his suit had taken quite a toll on him. The pain he felt shattered any optimistic delusions that his new gear would make his life easier.

Nevertheless, Akira was undeniably stronger than before, and Alpha’s support had also improved considerably. He was making progress, he told himself as he bit back the pain. After lying for a while on the desert ground, his aches largely subsided, and he forced himself into a sitting position.

Are you done resting? Alpha asked.

“Yeah, I can’t just lie down out here forever. I’ll get some proper sleep once we’re back at the hotel.” Akira needed more power to succeed as a hunter, and he couldn’t get that by resting. Desire for the strength to grasp his dream spurred him to his feet.

Okay. Then let’s get started on your close-quarters combat training. Seeing Akira so motivated brought a smile to Alpha’s face.

The training session began immediately, but the sparring had to wait. *This outfit won’t do. Time for a change*, Alpha remarked and deleted her

white dress. She was naked for a moment; then a rather singular powered suit appeared on her body. It comprised a legless bodysuit that tapered to an extremely acute angle at the crotch and a pair of ridiculously low-rise bottoms. The thin fabric showed every curve of her body, and openings of unknown purpose even revealed parts of her skin. Indeed, some people might have found the alluring ensemble more eye-catching than nothing at all. Her suit's design seemed completely at odds with the concept of utility in combat.

The sight brought a simple question to Akira's lips: "What on earth are you wearing?"

A type of Old World powered suit, Alpha replied, still smiling as usual.

"So that sort of outfit really exists?"

Yup. I'm sure you could find one if you looked in the right ruin.

Her explanation did nothing to give Akira an accurate impression of the Old World. He soon set the matter aside, however. Alpha's suit might have resembled Old World technology, with all its sky-high performance specs, but that didn't matter when its wearer wasn't physically there. At least, he didn't think it would.

"Do you need to wear that thing?" he asked, his look reflecting his perplexity.

I wouldn't mind changing to another outfit if you have a request, so long as it allows you to have a clear view of how I move, Alpha replied. *At your current skill level, you'll need to watch exactly what I'm doing if you want to get the most out of this exercise, so anything that would make my moves harder to predict is off the table.*

Some people could read an opponent's next move in the slightest twitch of their limbs. Others dressed to hide these tells. And taken to its logical extreme, Akira vaguely realized, that meant that the easiest opponent to read was a naked one. He dropped the subject.

"Makes sense. Now, let's get started. What do you want me to do? If I try to attack you, I'll just pass right through."

Throw a punch at me. It doesn't matter what kind.

Puzzled, Akira nevertheless obeyed. Alpha's right hand caught his strike —and his fist, which should have passed through her, stopped as if it had struck an obstacle.

"Huh? I hit you?" Akira said, startled by the unexpected turn of events.

“No, that’s not it. What’s going on?”

When I detect a collision, I partially simulate the feeling of landing a hit by locking the joints of your suit. Alpha grinned as she revealed her trick. *This should help you get a feel for things, don’t you think?*

“Makes sense. Is this more of that thing where you move my body without asking?”

That’s right. Now, let’s begin for real. Come at me. Alpha grinned tauntingly and beckoned with her fingers.

Akira again turned his attention to his training and charged. But, naturally, he was an amateur in hand-to-hand combat. Even if Alpha had been physically present, his blows would not have so much as grazed her. She telepathically criticized his every move in real time: how he formed a fist, the way he extended his legs to kick, where he chose to strike, how he positioned himself, how he stood, the way he closed distance, where he focused his gaze, how he shifted his weight, the tells before he dodged, and the ways he tried to defend himself. She also adjusted his suit to assist correct moves and to hinder mistakes, helping him feel the right ways to move.

With control of his suit, Alpha could simulate attacks on Akira as well. Blows to the gut knocked him backward, while leg sweeps sent him toppling to the ground. Even when he blocked her strikes, he still went flying unless his defense was firm.

Alpha always told Akira where and how she would strike, but he still struggled to fend off her assault. If he dodged one blow imperfectly, he received a perfect follow-up. If he blocked improperly, he took another hit while he was off-balance. If he took a blow to the head, Alpha counted it as a death, and they started over.

In actual combat, even a single strike from someone in a powered suit would tear Akira’s head clean off. It might not even be recognizable afterward. Blocking wouldn’t always suffice, so Alpha drilled into him that evasion should always be his top priority.

At one point, Akira fell flat on his back; as he lay there, Alpha raised one leg high until it pointed nearly straight up. Then she smiled and brought it down, a blow that would have pulverized solid rubble. Akira’s world slowed to a crawl as he watched her foot come down and strike his head.

If Alpha had been corporeal, her stomp would not only have crushed

Akira's head but obliterated it. As a vision, however, her foot merely passed through his face, burying itself up to the ankle. That was still enough to make him appreciate what would happen to him if he failed to dodge.

There. You're dead again, Alpha said. *Hurry and get back on your feet—or would you rather I forced you?*

Akira stared up at Alpha's face—although, since he was lying at her feet, her chest partially obscured it. Seeing her usual smile felt slightly unnerving to him.

"Don't bother," he said. "I'll get up on my own."

Akira staggered to his feet, leaving his own corpse lying on the ground with its head pulverized. It was a virtual fake, just like the AR images Alpha showed him during firing exercises, but the sight of it was enough to make him frown. The ground around him was already littered with dead Akiras.

You just racked up another corpse, Alpha remarked. *Work hard to make sure that the real you doesn't end up the same way.*

"Yeah, yeah, I know."

Akira threw himself back into his training. Alpha's gentle smile still gave him the creeps.

As the exercise dragged on, Akira noticed an unusual sensation.

"Hey, Alpha, do you mind if I ask you something?"

Go ahead.

"Erm, how should I put this?" He hesitated. "I've been getting weird feelings on and off for a little while now. Are you up to something again?"

Weird how? she asked. *All I've done is control your suit to help you learn movements more efficiently. Is that what you mean?*

"No, that's not it. It's like, by the time I decide to do something, I'm already doing it."

Your body is reacting slightly faster than your conscious decision-making, but your suit isn't forcing it to. Do I have that right?

"Yeah, that's basically what it feels like."

That's probably a kind of illusion, Alpha said. *My guess is that your skin is picking up on your suit's movements, and your body is unconsciously trying to match them. Then your mind confirms what it's doing after the fact. So I think what you're experiencing comes from that time lag between when you decide to move and when you're aware of it.*

“Really?”

But hang on to that illusion—moving in sync with that feeling should do a lot to reduce the strain on your body. And your suit’s movements are on the level of a highly trained master, so if you can keep up with that sensation, you might be able to fight like an expert without my help someday.

“Cool. Then it’s good that I’m getting this feeling?”

Probably. It’s no cause for alarm, anyway, so let’s get back to your training.

Akira and Alpha sank back into combat stances. As they resumed sparring, Akira relaxed and allowed the sensation to take over.

They continued exercises until just before sunset, by which point Akira was so exhausted that he could hardly walk back to his hotel unaided. Thanks to his powered suit, however, he returned safely—Alpha made good on her promise and took control of the suit to walk him home.

Getting a powered suit had made Akira’s training more efficient—and more grueling—than ever before.

Chapter 23: A Young Hunter's Understanding

Hunters—Akira among them—thronged a large square on the outskirts of Kugamayama City. This was the point of contact between the city and the wasteland, and a regular meeting place for many hunters and the mobile shops that catered to them. But the largest part of the crowd comprised hunters who had accepted jobs from the Hunter Office.

The Office did a lot of business connecting businesses and individuals who needed work done with willing hunters. It posted jobs in a wide variety of ways, both on- and offline, and most listings required, among other things, that the hunter possess a given minimum rank.

Rank ten hunters were considered mere amateurs—not even rookies—and so could only choose from a limited number of jobs. And since Akira was rank ten, he had signed up to patrol the city perimeter. Municipal vehicles would drive him around the desert, and he was to cull any monsters that got too near civilization.

It was the perfect job for a new hunter. He would be paid even if his party encountered no monsters, and receive a bonus based on his kills if they did. The patrols also had a high survival rate even among unskilled participants: they might not meet any threats, and if they were unlucky enough to do so, they could cooperate with other hunters. Those in search of fame and fortune, on the other hand, could compete to see who could bring down more monsters than their colleagues. Finally, the opportunity to be humbled and survive made it a good learning experience for novices to the deadly profession.

Most hunters had data terminals now, allowing them to sign up for jobs online and encouraging the widespread use of digital paperwork. Akira's grasp of technology was still shaky and would normally have made job applications a challenge, but Alpha had completed the process for him without a hitch. As a result, all he needed to do was show up at the meeting

place on schedule.

At the appointed time, a Hunter Office official barked orders to the group through a megaphone.

"Line up and present your hunter IDs! Make sure you board your assigned vehicle! I don't care what you do until departure time, but if you're not on board by then, I'll count that as abandoning your job! Get in line!"

The other hunters, who clearly knew the drill, formed a queue, and Akira joined it. Soon his turn came, and he waved his ID over the official's terminal, imitating the people ahead of him.

The official took a perfunctory look at Akira's information and said, "Get on car fourteen! Next!"

Akira left the line and headed for his assigned transport. Alpha, however, made a comment that unsettled him.

Number fourteen, huh? she said, her expression unreadable. *I suppose I shouldn't be surprised.*

How do you mean? he asked.

Don't worry about it. The number just has a bit of baggage.

What kind of "baggage" are we talking about?

Relax and leave everything to me. As long as you've got my support, you'll be fine. Just focus on coming back alive.

Just tell me what it means! Akira demanded. He'd only been vaguely curious at first, but this series of worrying statements rattled him.

But Alpha offered no explanation. She merely smiled reassuringly and said, *There's your transport. Get in, you wouldn't want to be late.*

Car fourteen turned out to be a large truck adapted for desert terrain. Cheap-looking benches were installed on either side of its open bed. The other hunters were already on board, and several cast sideways glances at Akira as he moved to join them.

Akira tensed up without meaning to. Faced with a large, armed group at close quarters—one he could hardly beat in a fight—he couldn't help imagining the worst possible outcome.

Abruptly, Alpha switched outfits before his eyes.

Akira, she said, *this seat's free.*

Akira didn't know what to make of her behavior, but he sat down in the space she indicated and looked straight ahead.

What did you suddenly change clothes for, Alpha? he asked, forgetting his nervousness in his confusion.

How do I look? she cheerfully responded, striking a pose.

It was a surreal scene: a smiling beauty in a risqué swimsuit flaunting her skin in the bed of a truck packed with armed hunters. That no one else so much as glanced at Alpha's eye-catching figure only made it seem even more bizarre, vividly reminding Akira just how out of the ordinary she really was.

Alpha's swimsuit beautifully complemented her seductive form. But Akira didn't feel like giving her his frank appraisal of the garment, so he focused on another angle.

You stick out like a sore thumb here, that's for sure, he answered. *I'm not exactly an expert on common sense, but even I know that this is no place for bathing suits. Definitely not the right outfit for a truck about to head into the wasteland.*

You're going to be stuck staring at a monotonous desert for a while, so I took it upon myself to liven up your view, Alpha responded, all mischief. *What do you think?* I'd *say I'm gorgeous enough to make up for the dull scenery all on my own.*

Who cares? Just go back to normal. Akira would have admitted that she brightened the view, but the overly surreal aspect spoiled the effect.

People will think you're a weirdo if you glower at me like that, Alpha teased.

Akira sighed and gave up trying to convince her to change back into a normal outfit. Their ridiculous argument had completely dispelled the excessive anxiety he'd felt when he boarded the truck. And that was the point of Alpha's antics, although he wasn't sharp enough to realize it.

Just as Akira shifted his attention to other things, the man sitting next to him—a hunter named Hazawa—clicked his tongue and spat, "*Another* kid?! What the hell? I must've drawn the short straw when I ended up on this truck!"

"What's the problem?" another hunter chimed in, chuckling. "I'd say we lucked out, since we won't have to worry about them taking our kills." He agreed they were riding with dead weight, while taking a different perspective on what that meant.

"I wanna get this done safely!" Hazawa shouted, looking around at the

other hunters. “I hear that a bunch of critters we don’t normally see around here’ve settled in the Kuzusuhara Town Ruins and messed with monster populations across the whole area!” He refocused his gaze on a particular section of the truck bed. “What’s wrong with playing it safe until things settle down?! Winding up in a group with these brats now is rotten luck if I’ve ever seen it!”

Akira took another look around at his fellow passengers and saw that they included other young hunters around his own age.

Hunting was rough work, and the pay scaled with the danger. Too much cowardice or caution could hamper getting that big score, but they also put the brakes on greed, which could otherwise prove deadly. The seasoned hunters chuckled at Hazawa’s timidity, but they also understood where he was coming from.

For one of the young hunters, however, Hazawa’s insults became too much to bear. His patience finally snapped, and he sprang to his feet and laid into the man with harsh words of his own.

◆

Katsuya, the young hunter who was venting his anger at Hazawa, was a handsome, firmly built boy around Akira’s age. He dared to raise his voice even amid the armed passengers, suggesting not so much the recklessness of youth as the vigor of someone who knew he could handle himself.

“Hunting’s about skill, not age!” he shouted, lashing out at the group that had been mocking him and his fellow young hunters. “I’m as much a hunter as you are! I’ve got a full set of gear and the skill to back it up. So don’t talk down to me just ’cause I’m younger than you!”

For all that the older hunter was used to brawling, he flinched at Katsuya’s intensity, but his prejudice remained undiminished.

“You think you’ve got skill?” Hazawa taunted. “Let’s hear your rank then.”

“Nineteen!” Katsuya snapped back. “Still got a problem with that?!”

Hazawa grimaced. Amateurs with only a full kit to recommend them started at rank ten. Those who stuck it out and racked up some experience in the wasteland reached around rank fifteen. Even rank eighteen would have been on the high end for hunters working this patrol job. And at rank

nineteen, Katsuya had more than earned his place in this group—at least, he didn't deserve scorn for his age.

A fresh look at Katsuya's equipment revealed that it was all fairly high-end gear—beyond the means of the rookies who'd just signed on, the timid veterans who stuck to patrol jobs, or the washouts with no hope of getting ahead.

Hazawa looked for a fresh outlet for his dark envy, and he soon found one.

"Ha. You brats are with Druncam," he said, forcing his frown back into a sneer. "You expect me to trust a rank you got just for tagging along after veterans?"

"You wanna repeat that?!" Katsuya demanded, scowling. He was indeed a member of Druncam—a large hunter syndicate operating out of Kugamayama City. The scale of the organization had allowed it some impressive achievements.

The Hunter Office gave preferential treatment to such large and influential groups for a variety of reasons. When a job demanded droves of personnel over an extended period, for example, the Office could off-load the trouble of managing shifts, filling vacancies, and distributing payment onto the syndicates. And given most hunters' violent tendencies, the Office found it worthwhile to convince them to form groups that would keep them in line. In this way, the Office encouraged the rise of the larger syndicates.

It also oversaw the organizations' activities and evaluated them based on a variety of metrics—most importantly, the percentage of jobs that they completed successfully. But a syndicate still needed to clear certain bars before the Office would approach it with the jobs that garnered recognition. Most importantly, the organization had to raise its overall hunter rank, which depended on the average and sum of the ranks of all its members. So the syndicates fostered a rampant illicit trade in achievement, with veteran hunters taking jobs alongside rookies (whose ranks were easier to raise) in order to boost their group's average.

The Office tacitly permitted the practice, up to a point. From a different perspective, it amounted to nurturing the next generation of hunters, so officials didn't see it as a major problem as long as the syndicates were completing jobs dangerous enough to merit the credit they received. That policy gave rise to groups focused solely on boosting their metrics, aiming

to land perks from the Office by padding their numbers with amateurs whose high ranks existed only on paper. Worse yet, some fools bought into their own inflated hype, and when they worked with others, the rest of their group would end up paying for their brainless stunts.

Such idiots had landed Hazawa in hot water before—hence his harsh complaints. And Katsuya's reaction just convinced the older hunter that he had hit the nail on the head.

"I bet you didn't buy that fancy gear with your own earnings either," he scoffed. "You only think you're a real hunter 'cause you're too stupid to tell the difference between specs and skill. You're just gonna get in our way and hold us back."

Katsuya had been on the receiving end of similar tirades many times before, and his anger boiled over.

"*You're* the one who'll slow us down!" he shouted. "There might be swarms of monsters out there, and you're whining about being teamed up with a bunch of kids?! You must've been planning to let the rest of us do the work for you, or you'd be focused on the chance to rack up extra kills!"

"Watch your mouth! I just don't wanna get stuck wipin' your asses for you!"

Their angry voices grew louder and louder as they argued pointlessly on. Even the other senior hunters who had mocked their younger colleagues at first began looking sour as the squabble escalated.

Two girls occupied the seats on either side of Katsuya. Their gear resembled his, and they too were young hunters with Druncam. The long-haired Yumina sighed and scowled as she watched the ongoing shouting match; the petite Airi observed the same scene with a disgruntled frown on her childlike face. Both were unhappy with this turn of events, but while Airi shared Katsuya's frustration with the older hunters, Yumina was more annoyed at Katsuya himself.

"Katsuya," Yumina called, a hint of a smile appearing as she rose to her feet.

"Yumina! Don't try to stop—"

Katsuya turned to face her—and immediately her fist knocked him back into the truck bed. The other passengers went dead silent for a moment, then began to murmur in surprise.

Yumina grabbed Katsuya by the collar and hauled him back to his feet before he realized what was happening. She pulled his face close to hers and glared as she snapped, “You can’t go around picking fights with every hunter you meet! We *are* kids, and you know it. So don’t fly off the handle every time somebody gives you shit about it! The only enemies you should be making on a trip to the wasteland are monsters!”

“Then what am I supposed to do—just shut up and take it?!” Katsuya glared back, unable to restrain himself, but Yumina gazed back even more fiercely.

“We’re hunters, remember?!” she roared. “Show them your skill and shut them up! Or is winning an argument all you want to do?!”

They stood eye to eye for a moment. After they had both calmed down somewhat, Yumina continued. “Anyone who keeps whining after they see what we can do just has a problem with our age. Losers like that aren’t worth your time. Powerful people keep their cool.”

“Fine.”

Katsuya returned to his seat, although he didn’t act happy about it. Yumina exhaled and followed suit. Then her expression softened, and she began expertly plastering medical tape with healing properties over the swollen bruise that her punch had left on Katsuya’s cheek.

“Sorry for making a fuss,” Katsuya grumbled, grimacing slightly, “but if you’re gonna patch me up, you shouldn’t have hit me in the first place.”

“You won’t listen to reason when you get like that, so I had to resort to fists,” Yumina countered as she assisted her childhood friend. “Giving you first aid is a separate issue.”

“I’m not sure I buy that.” Katsuya frowned.

“Not my problem,” Yumina smiled.

Airi, who had been watching the whole scuffle from the sidelines, cut in encouragingly. “We’ll get ahead in no time. We won’t have to listen to jealous guys like that when they’re eating our dust.” Her tone was flat, but her concern for Katsuya was plain. “Put up with it until then.”

“You’re right. Thanks.” Katsuya grinned, his good mood restored.

“Good.” Airi gave a satisfied nod, though she still kept her deadpan look.

But the commotion wasn’t completely over yet. While some of the other hunters had lost interest, glad to put the pointless quarrel behind them, the

confidence behind Katsuya's attitude rubbed others the wrong way. Hazawa, in particular, was none too pleased to see the boy simply brush off their argument. He was poised to pile on more invective when a hunter named Shikarabe spoke up.

"Sorry for the fuss."

At face value, his words were an apology, but his tone told all present that he meant them as a threat to anyone who made more trouble.

Shikarabe was a Druncam hunter who had come along to keep an eye on Katsuya, Yumina, and Airi. He was obviously a skilled veteran, and both his gear and his looks set him apart from the rest of the group.

"I'll be looking out for these guys, so you won't have to worry about them tripping you up. End of story," he added, sweeping the others with a fierce look that extinguished any lingering embers of conflict.

A statement from an obviously superior hunter forbade any further argument. Some—Hazawa included—still nursed complaints, but none had the guts to make an enemy of Shikarabe, so reluctantly they backed down.

"Time to go!" a Hunter Office official bellowed from the driver's seat. "From now on, if anyone starts anything, I'll kick 'em out and mark 'em as abandoning the job! And you there, from Druncam! Keep your brats in line! Let's move!"

If Shikarabe's threat had silenced the discontented hunters, the official's reprimand did much to satisfy them. At peace once more, the patrol group set off into the wastelands.

◆

The truck drove out into the desert, its bulky scanner sweeping its surroundings in search of threats.

Akira was relieved that the squabble had died down, but he still looked somewhat annoyed as he asked, *What was their problem? Who'd wanna start trouble right before we head out?*

It might be more of your bad luck, Alpha grinned.

Akira almost agreed, but then he thought of a different perspective. *Nah, it can't be that. Look how tough some of these hunters are.*

Hunters on patrol were paid for monsters killed on a "first come, first

served" basis. The truck's onboard scanners collected data which was then used to determine who was responsible for each kill. When it was impossible to credit a single hunter—if several had been firing at the same animal, for instance—all potential claimants, up to and including the entire patrol group, received equal shares of the reward. Accepting the assessment of kills and rewards without complaint was part of the job description.

The Hunter Office reserved the right to all monster corpses and, when relevant, mechanical wreckage—a rule which prevented hunters from delaying the patrol by trying to haul their trophies back with them. Retrieval teams might come for the remains later, although they were generally left where they fell. Collecting them simply wasn't an efficient use of resources.

The truck continued along its route without issue. While it crossed paths with monsters several times, most were solo or attempted to charge from far away—easy pickings for long-range fire from the truck bed. The hunters were assigned directions to watch based on their seats. So far, monster sightings had leaned toward the right side of the truck, where the Druncam team was sitting. Akira, who sat on the left side, had yet to bag a single one.

Hazawa, who occupied the seat next to Akira, mistakenly assumed that the boy was with Druncam.

"What are you doing over here?" he demanded irritably. "Get back on that side where you belong."

"I've got nothing to do with those guys," Akira answered calmly.

"Really?" Hazawa asked, eyeing him suspiciously. "But you're a brat too."

"Even brats need money, and there aren't many jobs that a low-ranked kid can take. It's just a coincidence that I ended up on the same truck as them."

"How do you explain that suit if it's not a loan from Druncam?"

Even a cheap powered suit was a big purchase. At the very least, it cost more than a rookie hunter could pay, and that went double for a child like Akira. So it wasn't a surprise that Hazawa looked askance at him.

Akira's expression hardened into one of determination. "I saved up and bought it myself. I got a deal because it's two generations out of date, but I still had to cut back on living expenses. I haven't been able to afford a room with a bath in ages. What I make on this job is going to buy me one again." The depth of his longing and resolve came through in his tone, and it

unsettled Hazawa.

“Y-You don’t say,” the older hunter responded. “Sorry I lumped you in with that bunch. Anyway, I get where you’re coming from. I take a bath every day, and I definitely wouldn’t wanna do without one.”

Under normal circumstances, Hazawa would have wondered if scrimping on living expenses was really enough to afford a powered suit. But in the face of Akira’s earnestness, the thought never occurred to him.

◆

Katsuya was finding it extremely difficult to line up shots on distant monsters from the truck bed. The sway of the vehicle kept the view through his rifle sight in constant motion. Nevertheless, he did his best to draw a bead on his next target before pulling the trigger. His bullet soared through the desert air and struck the ground far wide of its mark.

“Missed,” he muttered. “This is tricky.”

It would have taken a divinely inspired sharpshooter to land a shot at that distance from a moving truck. Katsuya was blessed with exceptional talent, but he was still refining it. He couldn’t expect better results at his current skill level, which fell far short of his future promise. Yet he had done the minimum required of him. His shot had landed near enough to the monster to alert it to the truck, and now it was closing in fast. Even that much was proof of his excellent marksmanship.

Katsuya hadn’t really expected to hit his mark, but he had still made a serious attempt. He longed to show off skills that would silence the hunters who looked down on him as a child.

The monster lacked ranged weaponry, so it was only a target for the time being. All Katsuya had to do was bring it down before it reached the truck, and he would get credit for the kill. And thanks to the effective range of his sniper rifle, he was currently the only one capable of targeting it.

But in the end, Katsuya wasn’t able to bring the creature down alone. He landed several shots as it approached, but none proved fatal. A burst of fire from his comrades finished off the monster once it entered the range of their weapons. Katsuya had met his minimum job requirement—luring in prey—but that was all.

“My turn next,” Airi said, holding out her hand to him.

Katsuya sighed regretfully and passed her the sniper rifle. Yumina watched the exchange with a wry grin.

◆

"Damn brats think they're hot stuff," Hazawa grumbled as he watched the young Druncam hunters from across the truck bed.

In a sense, the children were proving that they weren't dead weight—by taking advantage of their guns' specs to hog all the kills. Prey was first come, first served, and hunting was all about skill, so they had no duty or obligation to let anyone else get a share. But that didn't mean that anyone else appreciated their display of competence.

The young hunters took their profession extremely seriously, but they were still using high-end gear on loan from Druncam to take out every monster in the patrol's path. They even had the veteran Shikarabe looking out for them. To eyes prejudiced against the children, they were just living up to the stereotype by overestimating their own ability. And even if the other hunters had recognized the young trio's talent, it wouldn't have improved their mood. The Druncam group was still abusing its superior weaponry to claim every kill before the prey even came within range of their fellow passengers.

"Oh, I'm not talkin' about you," Hazawa added, remembering that Akira was sitting next to him.

"I don't mind," Akira responded, unperturbed. "I know I'm a kid."

His modesty—at least compared to Katsuya—restored some of Hazawa's good humor. Between that and Akira's story about moving to cheaper hotels to pay for his gear, the boy was rising somewhat in the older hunter's estimation.

"Yeah? Come to think of it, you use an AAH, same as me," Hazawa said, showing Akira his own gun. It was indeed an AAH assault rifle, although in a considerably different state of repair than Akira's. Still, he was happy to have found another fan of his weapon of choice. "Great rifle, isn't it? A real masterpiece. Some people trash it for being cheap, but pricey guns aren't always better. Spending more on weapons doesn't make a difference if you're not good enough to hit what you aim at."

Hazawa glanced at Katsuya. He hadn't been speaking for the young

hunter's benefit, but the truck bed was only so big. Katsuya couldn't help overhearing, and he grimaced in annoyance and frustration. But he kept missing, and Shikarabe had forbidden him to cause trouble, so he couldn't argue. Hazawa realized that and laughed mockingly at Katsuya's expense.

"Well, he *is* aiming at far-off monsters from the back of a rattling truck," Akira remarked offhandedly. "He won't have an easy time hitting anything, and I doubt he was trying to kill anything anyway. He's probably shooting to get their attention." His comments sounded like a defense of Katsuya, bringing a scowl to Hazawa's face and slightly brightening Katsuya's mood. But then he added, "That tough guy said he'll keep an eye on things over there and make sure they don't make trouble for us. Forget about that side until monsters start dogging the truck."

Akira only meant to warn Hazawa off any more squabbles, but Hazawa's and Katsuya's prejudiced minds took it differently—as a statement that the young Druncam hunters would be dead weight without a veteran to look after them. Hazawa's spirits lifted, while Katsuya's fell.

"Since we carry the same weapon and all, I'll let you take the first shot if any monsters show up on this side," Hazawa said amiably, having lost interest in Katsuya.

Akira wasn't sure what to make of the offer for a moment, but soon responded with "Thanks" and thought no more about it.

Not long afterward, a monster entered Akira and Hazawa's assigned zone. The large beast charged toward them as soon as it caught sight of the truck. Once Akira spotted it, he took a deep breath to steady his nerves and said, *Alpha, I'm counting on you*.

You got it, Alpha replied, her confident smile a contrast to his serious look. *How much support do you want? This is a chance to experience something different from your normal training, so you might want to try aiming for yourself.*

No, give me all the backup you can. The truck's shaking so much that I'll never hit anything without your help, so let's see how much your support can do in this situation instead.

When you put it like that, I suppose I've got no choice but to show off what I can do for you, Alpha smugly responded. *Leave it to me.*

Thanks.

Akira raised his rifle, peered through its sight, and took careful aim.

Predicted trajectory lines and markers on the monster's weak points augmented his vision. The sway of the truck should have affected his weapon and caused his aim to shake violently, but the view through his rifle sight remained still as a picture, focused on the target just barely within his AAH's effective range. Alpha kept delicately and precisely adjusting the weapon's position to cancel out even the slightest vibrations of the truck. When she sensed Akira was about to shoot, she pushed his suit to its limit to keep him in a perfectly calculated firing stance.

Akira pulled the trigger, and his bullet, guided by Alpha's incredible marksmanship, scored a direct hit on the distant monster's vitals—a slight wound. Two more pulls of the trigger sent more shots straight into the same part of the moving target. The second bullet ripped the wound into a serious injury, and his final shot pierced through the beast's tough skull and into its brain. It stumbled, collapsed, and lay lifeless.

Hazawa's smile froze in shock as he watched the thing go down. Not for a moment had he expected the boy to hit his target at that range.

"N-Nice going," he said.

"It's a great gun," Akira responded casually, lowering his rifle.

"T-True enough."

Hazawa was even more startled and confused. The boy almost seemed to take his hits for granted—as in fact he did, since Alpha had done the actual shooting.

What do you think? Amazing, right? she asked, wearing a smug grin.

Totally, Akira replied.

Then why don't you seem more impressed? she demanded, her expression dissatisfied.

Don't I? Well, it's been one surprise after another since I met you, so I guess I've gotten used to it.

Really? In that case, I'm sure I'll blow your mind again before too long, Alpha said, her usual smile restored.

Akira kept his cool, since any visible reaction to Alpha might draw suspicion. To anyone who couldn't see her, he looked like a master sharpshooter who didn't even crack a smile after landing an extremely difficult shot. And Hazawa was not the only surprised onlooker—Katsuya had witnessed Akira's feat as well.

The truck turned back toward the city, its patrol route complete. The hunters on board relaxed, and the truck bed grew noisy with small talk. Akira chatted with Alpha while keeping outwardly silent, although he took care not to look in a certain direction.

Alpha chuckled when she noticed his caution. *I take it you know you're being watched?*

It was Katsuya. He had been casting glances at Akira ever since the other boy's (and Alpha's) astonishing display of sharpshooting. Akira had noticed the attention but deliberately ignored it.

Who cares? Akira responded. *It's not like he's picking a fight with me.*

True. He might just not be used to seeing child hunters outside his group.

In Akira's mind, the young Druncam hunters were the kind of people who started unnecessary trouble. As long as they left him alone, he wanted nothing to do with them. He realized that his record when it came to causing problems was far worse, in light of his recent behavior at Sheryl's base, but he wasn't big on self-criticism.

Anyway, Alpha, we only ended up bringing down that one monster, he said. *Are all our jobs gonna be like this for a while? How much will I even get for this, by the way?*

Not enough to rent a room with a bath, that's for sure. Of course, your pay would skyrocket if another monster horde came after you.

Give me a break. I never want to go through that again. The memory made Akira grimace in spite of himself.

You could always run away on foot next time, now that you have a powered suit, Alpha suggested with a complacent smile.

No way. That'd shred my legs, and then where would we be?

Dosing up on recovery capsules while your limbs are still in one piece should buy you plenty of time before it gets that bad.

I'd prefer a solution that doesn't *end with my legs ripped to shreds.*

Akira turned to scowl out at the wasteland, deciding that if anyone asked what was bothering him, he would blame his poor earnings.

◆

Katsuya's inner turmoil showed in his frown. Occasionally, he caught

himself staring at Akira without realizing it.

“Katsuya, what do you keep looking over there for?” Yumina asked, giving him a puzzled look.

“No reason,” he slowly replied.

“Then cut it out. If you keep sneaking glances at people, they might think you’re looking for a fight.”

“I guess you’re right. Sorry.”

Despite his apology, Katsuya’s frown remained in place. Now that he realized he had been unconsciously staring at Akira, he forced himself to look elsewhere. But that only made the other boy loom larger in his thoughts.

“What were you thinking about while you were looking over there?” Airi asked curiously.

“Nothing, like I said,” Katsuya replied. “Forget about it.”

“I want to know.” Airi fixed Katsuya with an intense stare, a little jealous that he was focused on someone else while she and Yumina were right next to him.

Katsuya, however, was too distracted to pick up on those subtleties. “I saw that guy shoot down a monster, and it got me thinking. That’s all,” he explained, breathing a resigned sigh. But his description of Akira’s superhuman sharpshooting still left out any mention of how witnessing it had made him feel.

Airi briefly thought that over. “Probably a coincidence,” she said. “Or maybe you didn’t see what you think you did.”

“Could coincidence really explain a hit at that distance?” Katsuya countered.

“It was within the AAH’s effective range, so yes. And he might not have even hit it. Maybe he just hit the ground near the monster, and that startled it into tripping. A hard enough fall could even have broken its neck. Or another hunter might have shot it at the same time. I have a hard time believing that he landed a shot on it deliberately.”

Perhaps she was right, Katsuya thought, but he couldn’t bring himself to accept that answer.

“I guess,” he said aloud, “but that’s how it looked to me.”

“I wasn’t looking, so coincidence is the best explanation I can give you. Besides...”

“Yeah?”

“Even if he did make that shot as intended, it’s got nothing to do with us.”

“Sure, I’d be impressed if it really was all skill, but is that worth getting hung up on?” Yumina chimed in, looking puzzled. “Oh, were you hoping to ask him for pointers?”

“No, nothing like that,” Katsuya replied.

“Then forget about what other hunters can do,” Yumina advised. “We’re supposed to be keeping our noses to the grindstone and improving ourselves, remember?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“More importantly,” Airi added, still looking sullen, “you’re supposed to be our team leader, Katsuya, so you shouldn’t focus on other hunters while we’re around.”

Katsuya chuckled at himself, then gave Airi a firm smile. “You’re right. Sorry for getting hung up on a stranger while I’m leading you all. I promise to pay more attention to my teammates from now on. Is that better, Airi?”

“Uh-huh.” Airi nodded, satisfied, as the faintest of smiles creased her usually inexpressive face. The sight drew a chuckle from Yumina as well.

Katsuya hadn’t been able to come clean about his feelings because they were more than simple envy. Despite being roughly the same age, Akira had effectively embodied what Katsuya had hoped to achieve. Hazawa had looked down on them as kids—and yet, with a single, fleeting display of skill, the other boy had completely transformed the senior hunter’s attitude and clearly won his approval.

If that were all, Katsuya could have sung Akira’s praises without reservation. He would have felt a simple desire—a determined resolve—to follow in the other boy’s footsteps. But Akira just didn’t look capable to him. Nothing about the boy suggested he had the skill to make a shot like that without batting an eye. He could almost believe that it really had been a fluke—if his own exceptional innate sense for sharpshooting hadn’t told him otherwise. Yet that same proficiency also told him that Akira hadn’t done it by skill. The contradiction left Katsuya in total confusion.

He envied Akira, and so couldn’t help seeing himself in the other boy. But he also felt haunted by the criticisms that had been leveled against him. Through the lens of Akira, he saw them both as fools who couldn’t tell the

difference between borrowed strength and their own ability. And so, Katsuya couldn't bring himself to sincerely praise the other boy.

◆

The sight of Katsuya and his teammates chatting happily put Hazawa in a bad mood again.

"Ugh. They never stop getting on my nerves," he grumbled to Akira.

"Forget about them," Akira responded with apparent disinterest. "Getting hung up on them's a waste of energy, and you'll lose out for sure if it turns into a fight—especially with that tough guy waiting in the wings."

Hazawa glanced at Shikarabe, who sat near the young Druncam hunters, and muttered, "You've got a point. But tell me, how come you're so different from those brats? You're all about the same age."

As far as Hazawa was concerned, it was an idle question. But Akira needed a moment to come up with an answer.

"I bet we're not that different, really," he said at last.

"You think so?" Hazawa responded. "You seem like night and day to me."

"We're the same. We all risk our lives in the wasteland, even if some of us go harder than others—and even if not all of us realize it. Hunting relics takes luck and skill. So does taking on monsters and dealing with trouble. And the more we bet and the worse our odds, the bigger the payout. That's as true for them as it is for us."

Akira didn't mention that the greatest benefit of banding together with other hunters was access to their aid—which meant that teaming up with Alpha put him in a far more privileged position than Katsuya and his teammates had.

"Going out into the wasteland means bumping into people like them sometimes," Akira continued. "That just means we weren't lucky or skilled enough to steer clear of them. But we were lucky enough to make it back with no trouble. It's as simple as that."

Akira was still alive because he'd had the good fortune to meet Alpha. Even so, he'd experienced many brushes with death. He spoke with conviction, not so much for the other hunter's benefit as to warn himself against the complacency that putting too much faith in Alpha's favor would

breed.

◆

A thought struck Hazawa as he sat in the truck bed, watching Akira in silence. He had seen the boy easily dispatch a monster using an AAH just like his. In the heat of the moment, he had tried to look calm, but inwardly he was blown away.

Could he hit a target at that range with his own, identical rifle? He very much doubted it. The best he could do was to lay down a scattered burst of fire, counting on a few bullets to connect and slow his target down before he delivered more severe wounds and finally finished it off. He knew that bringing down a monster in the minimum number of shots, as Akira had done, was beyond him.

Hazawa looked from his rifle to Akira's. Both were AAHs, but the boy's looked perfectly maintained. The older hunter tried to remember the last time he had properly serviced his own weapon, but he couldn't recall. The AAH was famous for its ability to remain functional even in a poor state of repair, but neglecting maintenance still took a toll on its performance. Hazawa's rifle suddenly looked shabby to him.

Maybe I'm a lucky guy too, he thought, grinning bitterly at himself. *I mean, I survived a trip to the wasteland with this beat-up old thing.*

For all his efforts to skirt death by sticking to relatively safe jobs culling monsters, he had been courting disaster, working as he was with an ill-maintained weapon. The thought made work like patrol jobs, which he'd considered more trouble than they were worth at the best of times, seem even worse.

Hazawa had once taken a more proactive approach to hunting. He had delved into many ruins, discovered numerous relics, battled countless monsters, and returned from the desert alive. He had also seen a lot of deaths—comrades from his expeditions, robbers he'd fought, acquaintances who had suddenly stopped showing up at the bar. All those deaths had made him flinch and shy away from danger. They had stolen his chance to make it big and left him with safety in exchange.

No wonder I turned into a washed-up hunter who's too scared to take on big jobs, he thought. *I used to have more ambition.*

Katsuya's attitude had struck such a nerve with Hazawa partly because he sensed the boy's drive to succeed. Katsuya wasn't going to let fear hold him back, at least. And if his luck and skill were the real deal, then he would probably rise out of Hazawa's league in no time. Even the young hunter's anger at being looked down on showed that he refused to settle for his current lot in life—as Hazawa also had once upon a time.

The skill and drive that Hazawa had seen the two boys display were cause for self-reflection.

I'm gonna call it a day and really overhaul my rifle when I get home. Then, I'll start over, he decided. *I'm a lucky guy. Meeting those kids today was destiny's way of telling me to try again.*

Unbeknownst to anyone else, Hazawa resolved to take another shot at becoming the hunter he had once dreamed of being. And Hazawa really was lucky—luckier than he even imagined. That was why he left and spent the rest of the day performing weapon maintenance in his hotel room.

Chapter 24: A Job from the ELGC

The truck carrying Akira's group was back in the plaza it had set out from. The area was packed with other returning parties, the next round of patrols waiting to head out, and people killing time while they waited for their jobs to start. Mobile stores catering to the hunters mingled with the patrol trucks, adding to the congestion of people and vehicles.

As Akira clambered down out of the truck bed, he finally relaxed completely and let out his lingering mental fatigue in a sigh.

Good work, Alpha said, smiling cheerfully. *You made it back alive and in one piece.*

Yeah, Akira responded.

Thank goodness. It looks like my support saved you again.

Yeah, Akira repeated, less certainly this time.

I got seriously nervous that your bad luck would kick in when they sent you to car fourteen, but I guess I shouldn't have worried.

Are you ever going to tell me what the deal with that number is? Akira demanded, giving her a puzzled look.

Don't worry. It's not important, Alpha replied, her smile unwavering.

Before Akira could press the issue, an official's voice boomed, "Present your hunter IDs and confirm completion of your jobs! If you want your pay in cash, go get it from the Hunter Office payment window! The payment period starts at eighteen hundred hours this evening! You have forty-eight hours from the start of the payment period to collect before your money's considered forfeit! I repeat: present your hunter IDs and..."

The Office officials made essentially the same announcement to every group of hunters who returned from patrol. They wanted as little fighting over payment as possible.

Akira, go and officially complete your job, Alpha prompted. *You'll be in big trouble if you forget, so hurry up.*

I know, I know, Akira said. *Now change your clothes back already.*

Oh? Does this outfit bother you that much? Alpha flaunted her figure

with a seductive smile. Her sexy look and body language were a little too intense for Akira, now that he was back in the city and no longer keyed up for a wasteland expedition.

Just do it, Akira snapped.

Oh well. Alpha playfully shifted into an outfit that was at least less revealing than her swimsuit—albeit not by much. Even so, Akira decided it was good enough for now. Prolonging the argument might end in her changing back into something more distracting, and he didn't want to deal with that.

He got in line to register his job as complete and scanned his ID into an official's terminal, which beeped to announce that he had finished his patrol. As he basked in a faint sense of accomplishment, Alpha urged him to get out his terminal and check his records on the Hunter Office's site. She helped him navigate to his personal page and see that the patrol he had just completed was now listed in his résumé. Browsing the details, he saw the job's name, date and time, difficulty rating, in-depth description, his specific accomplishments, and more. The payment field read "calculation in progress."

Come to think of it, how do *I get paid?* he asked.

I set it to deposit into your account, Alpha replied. *The base pay is five thousand aurum. I don't know how much your bonus will be, but you only killed one monster, so I wouldn't count on much. The Hunter Office should send you your money as soon as the payment period starts.*

Akira's expression soured when he heard his projected earnings. *Still not enough for a room with a bath, huh?*

That was only your first morning job, Alpha said. *Your total earnings for today should cover one.*

I sure hope so.

Also, I'm not an expert on hunter rank. The promotion process is classified, after all.

Akira didn't care—that night's hotel bill currently meant more to him than raising his rank.

Patrols ran in three shifts in the morning and four in the afternoon. Depending on the number of monsters a group encountered, a single expedition could require a lot of ammo, so each truck was scheduled to return before the hunters on board ran through their reserves. Patrol jobs

were also popular with rookies, who often failed to show up for work despite filling out the paperwork ahead of time. Their reasons varied: some simply decided to no-show, others signed up for multiple jobs at once but fled in terror after a vicious attack on their first patrol, and still others fell—fatally or otherwise—to the monsters of the wastelands. Many ended up in this last category. The Office made no distinction—whatever their reasons, a hunter who failed to show up for work lacked commitment and ability.

Akira's next job began at eleven hundred hours. He had only fired three shots, so he had no need to resupply. He was chatting with Alpha to pass the time when Elena happened to walk by.

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"Akira! I thought I recognized you," Elena called, smiling in recognition. "Long time no see."

"It's good to see you again," Akira responded, bowing.

"I figured I'd bump into you at Shizuka's store one of these days, but she says you haven't been by in a while. Did something happen?"

"I ordered a powered suit from her, and while I was waiting for it, I holed up in my hotel room. Couldn't do a lot of hunting that way. Now that I've got it, I'm back at work."

"That explains it. I'm glad you weren't still getting over your injuries from last time or anything. So, that's your new suit?" Elena looked it up and down. "Pretty sharp. You look good in it."

"Thank you."

Elena smiled at Akira's slight embarrassment, but her expression soon sobered.

When I see him like this, Akira looks like just a normal kid, she thought. *And yet...*

Akira had just started puzzling over the change in her demeanor when she bowed to him and said, "I know this isn't exactly timely, but I want to say it too. Thank you for saving Sara and me. I really appreciate it." When she noticed his confusion, she looked him square in the eye and added, "Sara told me. Neither of us is going to ask you any nosy questions. That's a promise."

A conflicted look flashed across Akira's face for a moment, then he

grinned to mask it. “Oh, right. I understand. Thank you.”

Elena found his attitude a bit disheartening.

I guess he won’t open up to us right away after all, she thought. *Well, I shouldn’t be surprised.*

She interpreted his response as distrust—which hurt her somewhat, but she also understood where he was coming from. Akira was probably an Old Domain User and well aware of the danger that put him in, so she couldn’t blame him for keeping her and Sara at arm’s length. The cost of the wrong person learning his secret could be worse than death. With that in mind, she did her best to give him a smile that was reassuringly kind, sincere, and confident.

“I’m a fairly accomplished hunter—even if I may not look it—so I’d like to think that I understand the importance of trust,” she said. “And I wouldn’t want to get on Sara’s and Shizuka’s bad sides—or yours, of course. So, rest easy.”

“Oh, no. I’m not, er, suspicious of you and Sara or anything,” Akira responded, flustered by Elena’s earnest appeal.

“No? I’m glad to hear it. Thanks for trusting us,” Elena said, pleased. Then she continued, with some regret, “I’d love to stay and chat, but I’m actually in a bit of a hurry. Let’s have a nice, long talk at Shizuka’s some other time. Since you’re here, I’m guessing that you took a patrol job, but you’ve been out of the game for a bit, so be extra careful. Goodbye till next time.”

“Yes, I’ll keep my guard up. You take care too.”

Elena gave a quick wave and departed. She felt content that she’d gotten to thank Akira properly.

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When Elena was out of sight, Akira lowered his gaze slightly and exhaled. Once again, as with Sara, Elena’s thanks filled his heart with gloom.

Alpha guessed his feelings and called out, *Akira*.

He remembered her earlier advice—to help Elena and Sara in the future out of genuine concern, not merely as a pretext to kill someone else. And to hone his skills in anticipation of that day, both for their sake and for his.

With these thoughts in mind, Akira steeled his resolve and snapped out of his funk.

I know, he responded. *Don't worry.*

I'm glad to hear it. Alpha smiled. *Now get moving. It's almost time for your next job.*

Sure thing. Akira lifted his head and stepped forward resolutely.

This number again? Alpha grumbled, frowning as she accompanied Akira to his assigned patrol truck. *Feels like destiny.*

Once again, Akira was headed to car fourteen, and once again, he pulled a face at Alpha's ominous tone.

If you're gonna keep worrying me like that, he complained, *then you might as well tell me why this number's such a big deal.*

It's not terribly significant, Alpha replied. *There's just a teensy-weensy bit of a superstition about it.*

Oh, I see. It means I've got rotten luck.

Pretty much.

Akira felt that explanation was sufficient, and Alpha volunteered nothing more.

He cast a quick glance around the truck bed, checking who he would be riding with on this next job. But while he spotted a few familiar faces from his last patrol, neither Hazawa nor the Druncam hunters were on board.

So Akira was the only young hunter on this trip. No one made a fuss about his presence like Hazawa, but some of his companions clearly viewed him as dead weight—at least until his Alpha-assisted sniping brought down several monsters. Some marked him as an advanced cyborg after that. Feats of marksmanship that seemed superhuman at first glance presented little challenge to prosthetics running top-of-the-line software, and there was nothing unusual about a skilled hunter taking a low-end job to break in a new body.

The patrol was uneventful. The monsters in their path were just a bit tougher and attacked slightly more frequently than usual—which was lucky for anyone looking to collect bonus pay. Akira killed his fair share of beasts, and his face brightened as he thought of the payout their deaths would earn him.

By the time the truck turned back toward home, the men were looking

forward to hefty paychecks. They began chatting and laughing about living it up in the red-light district and other plans for their earnings. Akira shared their joviality. He couldn't estimate his reward based on his kill count, but the other hunters' attitudes gave him cause for optimism.

Looks like we'll be able to afford a room with a bath after all, he said, feeling confident now that he had a second patrol under his belt. *I'm gonna take a nice, long soak in a tub today.*

Not before your afternoon patrol jobs, Alpha reminded him. *You can't afford to slack off if you want to make baths a lasting part of your lifestyle.*

I know, I know. But more of these'll be no problem. Or is my next job extra tough?

It's rated the same, but jobs often turn out to be more difficult in practice than on paper. That's especially true of monster-extermination work like patrols. You should know that well by now. Alpha turned a knowing grin on Akira, who grimaced in response.

You've got that right, he admitted. *I'll be careful.*

He hadn't forgotten surviving two monster onslaughts in a single day, and he had no illusions about his own miserable luck. He had to stay on his toes.

After checking in for his next patrol, Akira paused in the square and bit into an energy bar for hunters on the go. Yet again, he'd been assigned car fourteen.

There's gotta be more than one truck with this number, right? he asked. He'd drawn this supposedly ill-starred number several times in a row now, and it made him feel apprehensive. Alpha, on the other hand, seemed over it.

Probably, but don't worry about it, she replied cheerfully. *Now, we have some time before your next patrol starts. How do you want to spend it?*

Beats me, he answered. *I've still got plenty of ammo left, so I don't need to resupply, and I just ate. I can't really think of anything else.*

In that case, might I suggest a nap on board your patrol truck? I can tell you're excited about how well your last job went, so you could be more tired than you realize. Even a light doze can make a big difference, so you should rest up just in case.

If you say so.

Akira made his way to the patrol truck and sat down in a corner of its empty bed. Setting his backpack at his feet, he prepared to catch a few winks.

I'll wake you when it's time for work, Alpha said kindly. *Sweet dreams.*

Thanks. Akira gave a nod and closed his eyes. As Alpha surmised, he was more fatigued than he knew, and a moment's relaxation was all it took for sleep to claim him.

Back when he was living on the streets, he could never have allowed himself to doze off amid so many armed strangers. It would have seemed like suicide. And though he didn't realize it, only his trust in Alpha allowed him to do so now.

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The square was bustling with hunters and merchants at work, but Elena and Sara attracted more stares than most as they waited for the people they were supposed to meet. It was Sara's chest. She had oversupplied on nanomachines, and her breasts (which stored them) were too voluptuous to squeeze into her body armor. For the moment, she was making do by keeping the front zipper of her suit pulled low, exposing her cleavage. She had cinched some sturdy gear straps above and below her chest to keep the opening from getting any wider, but that only made her shapely, ample bosom stand out all the more. And it was clear from the amount of skin her breasts exposed that she wore nothing else underneath.

"If you couldn't wear something over it, you should've at least put something on under it," Elena gibed, smirking.

"Wearing stuff on top makes it harder to move, so that's not happening," Sara shot back defiantly. "And all my intimates ripped—they didn't get along with this suit. I'm out of backups, and clothes tough enough for augmented wearers are pricey, so I'm just gonna have to grin and bear it for a while."

"I suppose you do have to worry about picking clothes that work with your suit, since that body armor also boosts your nanomachines," Elena admitted. "If only we could afford to stock up on Old World underwear—that's simple and durable enough to do the trick. Well, c'est la vie."

"You could always unzip your top as low as mine and draw away some

attention," Sara suggested impishly. "What do you say? Help a sister out?"

"No way," Elena replied with cheerful alacrity.

"What a shame." Sara gave an exaggerated shrug and laughed.

Just then, someone they were waiting for arrived—a boy who greeted them with an enthusiastic "Elena! Sara! Thank you for coming today!"

It was Katsuya, with Yumina and Airi in tow.

"Katsuya, don't run on ahead," the officious Yumina called with an exasperated grin. Then, under her breath, she grumbled, "I see *someone's* excited." But her jealous gripe went unheard, and she quickly regained her composure.

"Elena, Sara," she said, bowing. "Thank you for coming today."

"Thank you for coming," Airi echoed flatly.

The young hunters looked up to Elena and Sara. While each had their own feelings about the women, all three respected the pair as their betters. Druncam included many hunters more skilled than Katsuya, Yumina, and Airi, but it was hard to like veterans who looked down on children like themselves. Elena and Sara, however, had never shown even a hint of disrespect, scorn, or dislike during their many jobs together. They did have to make some accommodations for the younger hunters' lesser skill, but the trio accepted this as inevitable and even appreciated it.

And so, Katsuya was always eager to work with Elena and Sara. The pair were capable, kind, admirable—and, yes, gorgeous. Yumina and Airi, as fellow female hunters, aspired to be like them—and put up with Katsuya's infatuation as inevitable.

Shikarabe was the last to arrive. He rolled his eyes at the young hunters' undisguised enthusiasm but soon set his feelings aside.

"Am I late?" he asked Elena in a businesslike tone.

"No, you're fine," she replied.

"Okay. Take it from here, then. Put them through the wringer for me."

Through the Hunter Office, Druncam had been hiring Elena and Sara to work patrol jobs with Katsuya's team. The details of each listing varied, but the pair's duties implicitly included assisting, training, and guarding the young hunters—essentially, babysitting. Elena and Sara were well aware of this.

Druncam required its younger members to operate under the guidance of veteran hunters, who would care for them until they gained a certain level

of experience, ability, and accomplishment. This helped raise the survival rate of young hunters, who died even more often than others in their profession. It also served as a form of preferential treatment.

Katsuya had been assigned to Shikarabe, one of Druncam's most skilled hunters and the first to have spotted the boy's rare talent. But although Shikarabe saw Katsuya's potential, he had no personal fondness for the boy. So the begrudging caretaker used jobs as an excuse to dump his charges on Elena and Sara. He acted like his work was done now that he had placed the young hunters in their care.

"About that," Elena said a little apologetically. "Sorry. I know this is sudden, but we need to cancel."

"What?! Wh-Why?!" Katsuya cried, as shocked as he had just been excited.

"What do you mean?" Shikarabe demanded, startled and scowling. "You'd better have a good reason for backing out at the last minute."

"Naturally," Elena replied. "A sudden offer from the Hunter Office intervened. I feel bad, but that job takes priority."

Katsuya, Yumina, and Airi looked confused and disappointed, but seemed resigned. Shikarabe, however, wouldn't leave things at that. He gave Elena and Sara a look that showed just what Druncam thought of people who tried to break off an agreement on such a flimsy pretext.

"That's all it takes for you to blow off a job you already agreed to do for Druncam?" he said, a note of menace in his voice. "If you honestly think we'll let that slide, then I'll need to take measures."

But Shikarabe's threatening attitude didn't survive Elena's next words:

"Even if our new client is the ELGC?"

"The ELGC?!" Shikarabe repeated, visibly stunned. This was easily a good enough reason to forget any problems he had with Elena and Sara.

The Eastern League of Governing Corporations—ELGC for short—was the de facto ruler of the East. Even the Hunter Office was merely one agency under the League's massive umbrella.

"The job itself is nothing special—just a patrol through one of the more hazardous areas near Kugamayama City—but it came from the ELGC," Elena explained.

"You're sure?"

"Yes, although I'd normally expect a job like this to come from the city.

I don’t know what’s behind this, but it was a formal request via the Hunter Office, so a simple mistake doesn’t seem likely. Sorry, but we don’t have the guts to turn down the ELGC just to run a patrol with some familiar faces. The Office will wire you the cancellation fee, so please leave it at that.” The name of the ELGC carried immense weight with hunters, and refusing a request from it could mean making an enemy of the whole East if they weren’t careful. “Or will Druncam negotiate with the ELGC and take full responsibility?” A hint of a taunt appeared in Elena’s smile. “If you’re willing to go that far, we might reconsider.”

“Don’t ask the impossible.” Shikarabe grimaced and shook his head. “I understand, and I’ll let the rest of Druncam know. Still, I wonder what’s going on to get the ELGC involved.”

“Who knows?” Elena said. “But they are involved, so we’ve got preparations to make. Sorry, but we’ve got to go now. Tell the rest of Druncam that we did the right thing and canceled in person.”

Generally, the Hunter Office only issued jobs in the ELGC’s name to elite hunters near the Front Line. Elena and Sara were among the best operating around Kugamayama, but they still weren’t the type of hunters whom the ELGC asked for by name. They knew that as well as Shikarabe did, and the whole situation felt off to them.

“Well, them’s the breaks,” Sara casually told the young trio. “Sorry about today. Till next time.”

“Oh, yeah. It’s a shame, but that’s life,” Katsuya responded. He was disappointed but wasn’t about to make trouble. Sara noted ruefully that his gaze gravitated to her cleavage, although he quickly raised it again.

Once Elena and Sara were gone, Shikarabe called Druncam to report on the situation and discuss what to do about it.

Katsuya sighed. “A job from the ELGC, huh? That’s a surprise. Shame that it got in the way of our job though. I wonder when we’ll get to work with them again.”

Yumina and Airi regretted the loss of the job as much as Katsuya did, but their faces expressed conflicted feelings over his show of disappointment.

“You may never get another chance, especially after the way you were ogling Sara’s boobs. I wouldn’t be surprised if she can’t stand you anymore,” Yumina said, flashing a malicious grin. She hoped that a bit of

teasing would lighten the mood.

"W-Was I that obvious?" Katsuya spluttered as panic suffused his face.

"You were," Airi confirmed, deadpan.

"But I couldn't help it. I was entranced," Katsuya pleaded, desperate to convince himself as he grew ever more flustered. "Any man would feel the same way. Sara must understand that."

"She's a woman, so I doubt it," Yumina cut in.

"Wishful thinking can invite disaster," Airi added, coolly rubbing salt in the wound. "I suggest you give up." Her dispassionate remarks shook Katsuya more than Yumina's blatant teasing.

"Y-You've got it all wrong," he protested. "I was just curious about her pendant, since I've never seen a rifle cartridge on a necklace like that before. But it was hanging between her breasts, so I couldn't help looking."

"Now that you mention it, I'm not used to seeing necklaces on Sara," Yumina said. "The pendant wasn't exactly refined, but it looked good on her. Do you think it was a present?"

"I have a hard time believing that Sara or Elena picked it out," Airi responded, picking up on Yumina's plan without needing to be told. "It was most likely a gift from someone."

"Maybe her boyfriend."

"B-Boyfriend?" Katsuya repeated, shocked at Yumina's suggestion. "But that wouldn't make sense. If Sara has a boyfriend, why would she and Elena still be just a two-person team?"

"Maybe he's not a hunter," Yumina pointed out. "That would explain why they don't work together."

"And even if he is, he might already be part of a different team," Airi said. "Their professional relationships with their other team members could keep them from hunting together, or at least make complications they have to work out. That's another possibility."

The girls spent a while entertaining themselves by making Katsuya regret getting so hung up on another woman. He was powerless to stop them.

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Shikarabe scowled as he ended his call to Druncam, irritated that he'd

failed to reach an agreement with the higher-ups. After stowing his data terminal, he turned his attention to Katsuya's team.

"You can call it a day and split up if you want," he said. "If you decide to stick around, you'll run one more patrol with me in the afternoon. What'll it be? You lost your chance to work with Elena and Sara, so I'd say we might as well go our separate ways."

Shikarabe wanted to disband for the day, but as their supervisor he could hardly come right out and say so. He hoped that a meaningful look would get his point across while he waited for an answer.

Come on. Pick up what I can't tell you out loud and get lost. You must've noticed how on edge we all were during that conversation. I know you don't want to patrol together any more than I do, and you'll get another chance to work with Elena and Sara before you know it. You don't need to show off for me. Just call it quits.

Shikarabe's silent appeal was lost on Katsuya.

"What do you want to do?" the boy asked Yumina and Airi. "Since I'm already geared up, I'd like to get through as many jobs as I can and boost my hunter rank. The way we are now, Druncam won't give us permission to explore ruins on our own, let alone take jobs."

At present, the young hunters required Shikarabe's permission and a chaperone to do either. Katsuya was eager to put that restriction behind him, convinced that he would get more respect once he did.

Yumina shook her head. "I'm against it. The situation's changed, so we should call it a day and regroup."

"You think so?" Katsuya asked. "I know this wasn't part of our plan, but it's no big deal—just one extra patrol. We've already got everything we need, so let's adapt to the situation."

"There's a difference between adapting a plan and going in with none at all, which is what you're suggesting. And you say we're prepared, but we assumed that we'd have Elena and Sara with us."

"We're kitted out for the area we were supposed to patrol with them, though. That should be overkill for a normal patrol route."

"Did you already forget what Elena said when she explained why they canceled? This whole situation seems abnormal, and we can't be sure we're ready to deal with it."

Again and again, Katsuya gave an optimistic opinion, and Yumina raised

concerns to counter it. At last, Katsuya turned to Airi to break the cycle.

"What do you think?"

"I'll abide by your decision," Airi replied. "After all, you are our leader."

Her vote guaranteed that Katsuya would carry the day. Outnumbered two to one, Yumina gave up and agreed to go along.

Shikarabe watched the trio—and Katsuya in particular—with cold reproach.

Another vote in name only, he thought.

The veteran had once had five young hunters in his care, but only Katsuya, Yumina, and Airi remained. Whenever the children put something to a vote among themselves, Yumina and Airi had sided with Katsuya, ensuring that his opinion always triumphed. The other two had gotten fed up and requested transfers to other teams.

Still, I guess it's better than before. The shift to a three-man team had brought no immediate changes. Recently, however, Yumina had begun to disagree with Katsuya. Sometimes, she would even punch him out if that was what it took to stop him.

Katsuya usually got what he wanted anyway—he was the team leader, and Airi still invariably voted with him. Even Yumina wasn't seriously opposed most of the time—she just wanted to make sure any potential problems were addressed, and she only resorted to fisticuffs on select occasions.

"We've decided to go ahead with the patrol," Katsuya informed Shikarabe.

"Fine." Shikarabe gave Druncam another call to have them sort out the paperwork. But once Katsuya's back was turned, he breathed a disgruntled sigh over his data terminal.

Shit. If I didn't have to babysit these kids, I could be digging up info on that ELGC job right now. I get that training the next generation is important, but their gear comes out of our paychecks, and we're the ones who get stuck working low-paying jobs to show them the ropes. I wish the bosses would give that a little more thought.

Shikarabe understood his problem was with Druncam's leadership, not with Katsuya's team. Even so, he couldn't bring himself to hold the young hunters entirely blameless. Some ill feelings inevitably arose between those

who reaped the benefits and those who bore the costs.

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Elena and Sara were in their garage, preparing for their patrol. They packed their desert utility vehicle with munitions and checked its onboard machine gun and scanners. With the utmost care, they installed additional armor and added extra energy to the car's tank. All excessive measures for a tour of the city's vicinity.

Each woman took responsibility for ensuring that she had everything she needed to do her own job. As a general rule, Elena served as the driver—which meant she also operated the machine gun and scanners. Sara's primary role was leaning out of the car with guns in both hands and mowing down monsters.

"Hey, Elena," Sara said, "what do you make of this job?"

"I did some digging, but I didn't find out much. Still, it seems like similar offers are going out to hunters in the nearby ruins," Elena replied. Neither of them thought for a moment that the ELGC had chosen them for their skill, so they had tried to learn all they could in the little time available to them. "If the ELGC asked for hunters at our level by name, we ought to assume that they've called up a lot of others too. They might be trying to bring every hunter in the region back to the city."

"You think they picked up an enormous wave of monsters or something?" Sara asked, looking puzzled.

"Why would the ELGC take the lead, then? The city defense forces could probably handle that if they really tried."

"That's true. And don't a lot of clients inside the walls gripe about how much those guards cost to maintain? This would be a golden opportunity for the city to show off what their army's good for. They'd have no reason to call in hunters who might steal the show from them."

"You're right," Elena agreed, frowning. "That's why I can't figure out what's behind this job. I hope it's simply a 'just-in-case' scenario, but we'd better be ready for anything." Her tone grew more relaxed. "Anyway, it'll work out. We've been on a roll lately, so we've got a steady income and all-new gear. It's hard to believe we were ever down on our luck. I know they say that when things go wrong, they go wrong all at once, but I still wasn't

ready for how rough we had it."

"That was a hell of a rough patch," Sara said with feeling. "And it all turned around right after Akira bailed us out, as if he saved our luck as well as our lives. I really can't thank him enough."

Elena smiled and nodded. "Speaking of Akira, I bumped into him earlier today. It was a relief to finally thank him in person. And don't worry, I promised not to get nosy or tell anyone about him, just like you did."

"You saw Akira? Where? I figured that I'd run into him at Shizuka's store one of these days, but I haven't seen him."

"In the square where we met the Druncam kids," Elena explained. "It looked like he was working patrol jobs too. He told me he ordered a powered suit from Shizuka and was staying put in his hotel until it came in. I can't blame him—he wouldn't be able to take advantage of his new suit if he got hurt in the wasteland while he was waiting for it."

"So Akira's steadily upgrading his gear. We'd better not slack off either, then."

"Not on your life!"

Elena and Sara laughed and continued with their preparations. They couldn't predict what lay behind this job from the ELGC, but they were confident that they could handle it.

Chapter 25: Crazy, Reckless, and Rash

Akira, it's time! Wake up! Alpha shouted in Akira's ear as he sat dozing in the bed of the patrol truck. No one else could hear her voice, so there was nothing to stop her from yelling loud enough to blast his drowsiness away.

Akira snapped awake and looked up—into the eyes of a Hunter Office official named Kibayashi.

As both the truck driver and the person in charge of the patrol, dealing with the hunters riding in the truck bed was part of Kibayashi's job. Seeing Akira bolt awake as if on cue—just before Kibayashi checked on him—drew a chuckle from the official.

"I was gonna kick you out if you overslept, but you woke up right on time," he said. "You must have one hell of a good alarm clock."

"Yeah, real high-spec," Akira casually replied, much to Alpha's displeasure.

Excuse me? she said, with uncharacteristic indignation. *Who are you calling an alarm clock?*

Sorry.

The nerve of you!

"Time to move out!" Kibayashi barked at the assembled hunters. "If anyone starts trouble, I'll kick 'em out and mark 'em as abandoning the job! Got that?!"

Akira took a quick look at his fellow passengers and spotted Katsuya's team. Based on Kibayashi's warning, he guessed they had sparked another argument. He wanted no part of it and avoided looking at the other boy.

The truck soon rolled out into the desert. Akira's third patrol had begun.

The patrol itself was going smoothly, but the hunters hoping to earn massive bonuses felt it was an enormous waste of time. So far they hadn't encountered a single monster.

The large scanners aboard the customized truck could detect threats over a vast area, and patrols were supposed to cull the monster population. So

when a group ended up with an exceptionally low encounter rate, it went looking for targets. If hostile creatures still failed to materialize, then the area was totally devoid of monsters.

The hunters in the truck bed were relaxed, and small talk filled the air. Veterans with a lot of patrols under their belts were especially at ease, since they knew that the onboard scanners virtually eliminated the risk of ambushes.

Nothing's showing up, Akira said. He stopped glowering at the wasteland long enough to check Alpha's reaction.

True, she responded frostily.

Alpha had been like this since their departure. She made no attempt to meet Akira's gaze, and there was a harsh note in her voice. Akira took her lasting displeasure as a sign that he must have really offended her with his earlier remark.

I'm sorry. I didn't think my offhand comment would bother you this much.

Akira's frank apology did much to soften Alpha's demeanor, but traces of her displeasure still lingered.

Well, all right, she responded. *I don't want you walking on eggshells around me, but lumping me in with alarm clocks is crossing the line. Think before you speak next time.*

Akira couldn't help wondering why Alpha minded so much, but he didn't want to kick a hornet's nest by asking. Alpha quickly picked up on the vague awkwardness behind his silence.

If you want to put me back in a good mood, you might try saying something to make me happy, she suggested, smiling seductively as she struck a risqué pose in front of him.

Because of Alpha's constant teasing, he often forgot to thank her from the heart. So after a moment's thought, Akira straightened up and looked at her earnestly. *I wouldn't have survived this long without you. Thank you for steering me clear of monsters in the ruins, leading me to relics, helping me out in fights, and everything else you've done. I'm really grateful. Now that I've got a powered suit, you even help with my aim. I don't know what I'd do without you. Thank you so much. Please keep looking out for me.*

You're very welcome. I appreciate your help too, so I'm looking forward to our continued partnership. Alpha beamed at Akira. But in the ensuing

silence, her smile shrank to a faint grin.

That made me happy, to an extent, she said, *but it wasn't quite what I had in mind.*

Akira gave her a puzzled look. Had thanking her for a change not been good enough?

Really? he asked. *Did I say something wrong?*

No, but don't you have anything to say about, oh, I don't know...my outfit?

Alpha had changed into a swimsuit while Akira slept. The revealing garment lent her figure a sense of energy, freedom, and sexual allure. Akira took a fresh look at her and responded with the honest opinion that he'd been keeping to himself.

You totally stick out like a sore thumb. I wish you'd change into something else.

Alpha breathed a faint sigh. After deleting the swimsuit, she shifted into a military bodysuit that covered her to the tips of her toes. Its front zipper—which ran from her collar past her chest and crotch and ended near her waist on the back side of the suit—was opened daringly low, exposing a wide swathe of bare skin. She had covered up considerably, but her outfit still demanded ogling.

You blend in better than before, Akira said. *Of course, you can only look so natural when you're floating in the air.* He was facing the wasteland, both to keep an eye out for monsters and to avoid looking like a weirdo staring at nothing. Alpha stood in midair before him, as if on an invisible floor.

That's not what I mean, she responded, her smile growing strained. *I was hoping for a compliment on my lovely looks or clothes. Something like "You're gorgeous" or "That looks great on you."*

Oh, okay. Akira looked surprised, but when he continued, it was in his normal tone. *You're drop-dead gorgeous, and basically everything you wear looks great too. That last outfit was totally out of sync with where we are, but I still think it's amazing on its own.*

You mean it? You don't sound *too enthused.*

I don't know what to tell you. This probably isn't the nicest way to put it, but I guess I've, er, gotten used to you.

Alpha's appearance was the result of her astronomical computing power.

So she could alter her form and figure at will, sculpting a bewitching image brimming with exceptional beauty. Akira's first sight of her had shocked and entranced him. Now, however, she barely fazed him. She was with him round the clock, often entirely or nearly naked, and had even joined him in the bath. He supposed that, as they'd grown more familiar, he'd become more comfortable with her quirks.

Have you now? Alpha mused, somewhat persuaded by his explanation.

Hey, you're not getting any weird ideas, are you? Akira asked. The look on her face unsettled him.

You're imagining things. Alpha brushed off his suspicious gaze with a smile.

◆

"It's him," Katsuya muttered when he boarded the truck for his patrol and spotted Akira napping in the back corner.

"I see some other hunters we rode with last time too," Yumina said, also scanning their fellow passengers. "But not the guy who flew off the handle at you, thank goodness."

"Katsuya, keep your cool this time," Airi added for emphasis.

"I know, I know," Katsuya responded. "But should he be sleeping like that?"

"Leave him be," Shikarabe said. He sounded bored, but his tone brooked no argument. "Don't interact with anyone outside of Druncam unless you absolutely have to. If he doesn't wake up in time, he'll just get kicked out, so forget about him and sit down."

The young hunters did as they were told and began chatting to kill time while they waited to set out. Unconsciously, Katsuya kept stealing glances at Akira, but the other boy showed no sign of waking even as the departure time approached. He was on track to get kicked out of the patrol before it started, just as Shikarabe had said.

Katsuya's mind filled with a sense of disappointment that he didn't really understand. Was this all that the other boy amounted to? Had his performance been a fluke after all?

Then it was time to set out, and Kibayashi was stalking toward the sleeping Akira. It was too late. The boy was nothing special after all,

Katsuya decided as his interest in Akira began to wane.

But all at once, Akira awoke. Katsuya watched—startled, bewildered—as the other boy even shared a joke with Kibayashi. The patrol began without incident, although Katsuya kept his gaze fixed on Akira, determined to settle his doubts about the latter's skill once and for all. But with no trace of a monster in sight, he never got his chance.

◆

The patrol truck came to an abrupt halt, although it still had yet to encounter anything hostile. The party of hunters grew alert as Kibayashi joined them in the truck bed.

"I've got news for you," he announced. "First, your patrol jobs are officially over as of now. They've already been logged as complete. Next, here's our current situation. We've got reports that a huge swarm of monsters from the Kuzusuhara Town Ruins is advancing on Kugamayama City. The city defense forces are already mobilizing."

A stir spread through the hunters.

"The city's issued an emergency listing, and they're asking for help from us. Trucks patrolling near the ruins are already fighting to delay the swarm, and our job would be to back them up." Kibayashi raised his voice above the murmuring. "I'm putting this to a vote! If more of you want to take this emergency job, this truck will head straight for the nearest distress call! If not, we go back to town on the double! Whatever we do, the minority can go the other way on foot. The vote will be in five minutes. That's all."

Kibayashi had said what his job required, but he doubted that he would even need to count votes—the whole group would obviously return to the city. No one assigned to this simple patrol would have the gear or the ability to handle this emergency. Even if someone volunteered, they would be firmly in the minority, and no one would be stupid enough to let the truck leave them behind. Anyone dead set on taking the job would ride back to Kugamayama with them to prepare first.

The hunters in the truck bed exchanged looks and confirmed what they already knew.

I assume we'll be turning back, Akira? Alpha asked, also certain about the outcome but still going through the motions of consideration.

You bet we are. Who'd want to take on that many monsters? The memory of his previous run-in with a swarm, which he had just barely survived thanks to Elena and Sara's aid, made him profoundly averse to the idea, and it showed.

Like Akira, most of the other hunters had already made up their minds to return to the city. Most—but not all. Katsuya stood alone.

◆

Katsuya spent the five minutes leading up to the vote in a fierce argument with Shikarabe, drawing more and more stares as their clash heated up. The older hunter rejected out of hand Katsuya's request to take the emergency job. But the boy refused to take no for an answer, and Shikarabe's annoyance gradually turned to irritation and finally to rage.

"No!" he roared, aiming to crush any dissent. "Now give it a rest already!"

Katsuya didn't flinch, revealing his determination—and his anger.

"You're the one going against Druncam policy!" he shouted back. "We're supposed to take emergency jobs whenever we can and get our name out there! We can do this!"

"That only goes for jobs we can survive! And leave me out of your 'we'! I'm not part of your team!"

"Time's up!" Kibayashi barked, cutting the fruitless argument short. "If you want to take the job, raise your hand!"

Only Katsuya's hand went up.

"The nays have it! We're going back to the city! If your heart's still set on the emergency job, get out and run!"

Katsuya fumed as he watched Kibayashi return to his driver's seat. "That job Elena and Sara took must've been prep for this attack. I know I can take care of myself well enough to help!"

"Katsuya," Yumina said soothingly, "I know how you feel, but this is just crazy."

"It's definitely reckless," Airi added.

But their restraining voices were lost on their enraged teammate.

"He wants me to get out and run?! Fine! That's just what I'm gonna do!" he shouted, frantic and scowling.

He had his hand on the edge of the truck bed, ready to make good on his threat, when Yumina called, “Katsuya.”

“Yumina, don’t try to sto—” He froze.

Katsuya wasn’t going to let a punch change his mind this time, but instead he saw his teammate’s rifle pointed right at him. He was too shocked to respond, and the other hunters hastily backed away.

Only Yumina seemed perfectly calm—but her eyes were deadly serious. Seeing her earnest look, Katsuya faltered, anger giving way to surprise.

“H-Hold up, Yumina,” he said. “You’re joking, right?”

“No. You’re serious about this, so I mean business too.” Yumina sighed, keeping her weapon trained on Katsuya. “You always leap at a chance to help someone, even when it’s an emergency listing. I love that about you. I love watching you help people, and I love how happy you look when your hard work pays off and you manage to save someone. I really do. It’s impressive and admirable, and that’s why I want to help you too.”

Yumina’s eyes narrowed.

“But I don’t want you to get yourself killed. Not ever. When you put your life on the line to save someone, I’ll be with you. But if you run off to die for someone else, I’m going to stop you. And what you’re trying to do now isn’t just rash—it’s suicidal.”

Her tone underscored that she meant every word.

“I know you’re serious about going to help. You won’t give up just because someone tells you no or tries to hold you back. So I’m just as serious about stopping you—even if that means shooting through both your legs.” Her glare intensified as she concluded, “Katsuya, if you understand, let go of the truck.”

Katsuya didn’t move. His hand still gripped the edge of the truck bed. Although he realized Yumina was in earnest, he was also stubborn, and his desire to help was genuine. But did he want it badly enough to take a bullet from his teammate? That was a thorny question. Yet if he gave in, he would look like he’d *wanted* someone to stop him, and his pride wouldn’t tolerate that. So he remained motionless.

Airi broke the deadlock: she seized Katsuya’s other hand and shook her head imploringly. Unlike Yumina, she would rather have accompanied Katsuya into certain death than stand in his way. But she didn’t want him dead any more than her teammate did and tried desperately to stop him in

her own way.

Katsuya sensed that their resistance came from the heart. Swallowing his pride, he released his grip on the edge of the truck bed and returned to his seat. Airi's expression relaxed as she sat down beside him, still holding his hand. Yumina lowered her rifle and took the seat on his other side, although she still looked grim.

"Feel free to resent me for forcing you to stay," she said without looking at Katsuya.

"No, I wasn't thinking straight either," he replied, flashing a grin. "Looking back with a cool head, that really was a rash idea. Even if I was going to take the job, heading back to the city to gear up first is obviously the right call. Thank you for stopping me, Yumina."

Yumina blushed, frowning to hide her embarrassment. She hadn't expected gratitude.

"You'd better thank her, Katsuya," Shikarabe interjected. He had watched the entire scene play out in annoyed silence. "If Yumina hadn't stopped you, it would've been my job, and I wouldn't have done anything so gentle as shooting you in the legs." In a mocking tone, he added, "Lucky you that someone around here likes to play nice with whiny brats."

As far as Shikarabe was concerned, the argument he'd witnessed was just a senseless farce. Pulling a gun on another hunter on the truck was already beyond the pale. That the team leader had caused the fuss, instead of stopping it like he was supposed to, only made it worse.

Katsuya glowered, but he kept silent and remained in his seat.

Shikarabe reined in his temper, turned to the rest of the patrol, and hollered, "Sorry for the trouble! We're ready to move!"

The truck hadn't started up yet, and he assumed his group's squabble was to blame. But although he shouted loud enough for Kibayashi to hear, the vehicle stayed put. Puzzled, he looked toward the cab, as did the other hunters.

They saw Kibayashi out of the driver's seat and Akira astride a small motorcycle.

◆

Akira had overheard the Druncam hunters' argument, including the

suggestion that Elena and Sara were en route to repel the monster swarm. After a moment's consideration, he stood up and shouldered his backpack.

Alpha realized what he was thinking and intervened.

Akira, won't you reconsider? I shouldn't have to tell you how much danger you'll be walking into.

I know. Akira jumped down from the truck.

Elena and Sara might not even be in trouble, Alpha continued. *And at your skill level, you might just get in their way.*

True. Akira walked up to the truck's cab and knocked on the driver's door.

"Yeah?" Kibayashi said, poking his head out. "We're about to leave."

"What do I have to do to accept an emergency job?" Akira asked, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

For a moment, Kibayashi looked surprised. Then he gave the boy a questioning look and said, "Huh? You want the job? And you're gonna, what, walk there from here?"

"Run," Akira answered with alacrity.

"Whoa. Hang on. That's not what I mean." Kibayashi was more baffled than ever. "I know I said to go on foot if you care that much, but that was just a figure of speech, you know?"

"I can run pretty fast in this suit. Not as fast as a truck, but I should still get there quicker than I would if I went back to the city and hitched a ride out in another car."

"I didn't see your hand up when we took that vote."

"I changed my mind. My vote wouldn't have made a difference anyway."

Kibayashi stared at Akira in disbelief. "You're serious?" he murmured at last. Then he burst into heartfelt laughter. Once his mirth subsided, he said, "Hey, can you ride a motorcycle?"

No problem, Alpha interjected.

"No problem," Akira repeated. Only then did he remember that he had never ridden a motorcycle in his life. Still, he trusted Alpha's judgment.

"Great! Wait just a sec!" Kibayashi said cheerfully and withdrew deeper into the truck.

Alpha's expression soured. *Akira, it's not too late to reconsider. You might not even find Elena and Sara where you're going, and you won't*

make a difference in a battle on this scale.

If I won't make a difference either way, then I'd still rather try, Akira replied. *I don't want to regret not going if I maybe could've done something. I've at least resolved to choose that much, even if it's all pointless.* Elena and Sara had saved his life and thanked him for saving theirs. And he had used his saviors as an excuse to kill people he'd wanted dead anyway. The debt and the guilt that Akira felt concerning the pair drove his decision.

Of course, he realized he might not join up with them even if he answered the emergency listing. And in the unlikely event that he did find them, he might prove more hindrance than help. Yet he still took the job. He couldn't bring himself to stand by while Elena and Sara fought.

In all this, Akira acted purely to satisfy himself. That was why he didn't hesitate to risk death. His life was his own, and he didn't care if he lost it in a rash charge at a monster swarm. In the slums, his life had been just about the only thing he'd had to gamble with. Mentally, he was still back in those alleys, where risking his life to gain anything was a given.

Alpha, meanwhile, finally got an inkling of the principles that guided Akira's actions. Determining that trying to stop him would be a waste of time, she gave him an exasperated look and heaved an exaggerated sigh, just in case—but as she expected, her gesture did nothing to reverse his decision.

"Thanks for waiting!" said Kibayashi brightly, clambering down from the cab with a collapsible motorcycle in his arms. The bike was small but designed for the rugged wasteland, and even in its fully collapsed state, it just barely fit into the truck's passenger seat. One was always kept on board to send for help if a monster attack or other disaster rendered the vehicle incapable of both movement and communication. The bike was stored in the cab because that duty usually fell to a Hunter Office representative—and because some hunter might ride off with it if it were kept in the truck bed.

Kibayashi assembled the motorcycle in a few simple steps, then patted its seat and said, "Hop on: it'll get you there faster than running. And get out your hunter ID." He took the card from Akira and scanned it into his official terminal.

"Now you're officially on the job. There's no telling where you'd get assigned if you'd used your terminal to apply through the Hunter Office

site, but I just set your destination to the nearest battlefield. Oh, and that bike's an advance payment, so watch out," he added, jovially threatening. "The Office'll chase you to the ends of the earth if you run off with it."

"If I were gonna chicken out, I wouldn't have signed up for this job alone in the first place," Akira said without concern.

Kibayashi's grin broadened. "You've got me there! All right, get going! Be crazy, reckless, and rash! The height of true hunting is to gamble your life and win a fortune! To live fast and die fast! We don't see enough hunters like that these days!"

"If you ask me, I'd say I'm more the cautious type."

"Ha, that's a good one! Like anyone cautious would ride off to take on a swarm of monsters!" Akira had spoken sincerely, but Kibayashi took his response as a joke—and a good one, judging by his laughter.

"Your terminal will show you your exact destination, but you're headed roughly northwest of here. Thataway!" Kibayashi added. "You should be able to hear hunters' gunfire and monsters crashing around once you get closer! Good luck and good hunting!"

Akira straddled the motorcycle and rode off. Kibayashi watched him go, in high spirits.

The hunters in the truck bed looked on, their faces a mosaic of expressions and feelings: shock, admiration, aspiration, confusion, envy, scorn. Each harbored their own blend of emotions as they gazed at the back of someone who had chosen his own path.

◆

From his seat in the returning truck, Katsuya felt conflicted as he saw Akira ride off in the opposite direction. Now that his head had cooled, he realized that the other boy was being reckless in the extreme. The logical part of Katsuya's mind concluded that if Akira really was on his way to answer that distress call, then he wasn't likely to return alive.

Yet Akira's retreating figure represented Katsuya's authentic desire. Silencing Hazawa with his skills, answering the emergency listing alone, and acting coolly and calmly—Katsuya had tried them all and failed.

Katsuya watched Akira vanish into the desert, with frustration etched on his face—and ambition and envy in his eyes.

Chapter 26: The Underage Relief Force

Akira sped through the desert on his motorcycle. Despite his complete lack of driving experience, he made good time over the rugged terrain—strictly speaking, Alpha was the one in control. She was an excellent driver and had already mastered the art of using his suit to operate the vehicle.

Alpha! Akira called. He couldn't believe how fast they were cutting across the unpaved wasteland. *I figured this bike was just a cheap piece of junk, since that guy tossed it in as an advance on this job, but we're getting some serious speed out of it!* Their pace owed more to Alpha's technique than the motorbike's specs, but he had no way of knowing that. As far as he was concerned, it was an impressive machine.

It's a small, collapsible model, but it's still designed for the wasteland, so it wouldn't come cheap. You got quite the bargain, Alpha replied. She floated beside the speeding motorcycle—or seemed to, courtesy of Akira's augmented vision. Every windblown strand of her hair was perfectly calculated to simulate the appearance of flight.

Is it really that good?! Akira shouted. *I know it's part of my pay, but I bet it's gonna cost me!*

The bumpy ride would normally have made conversation impossible, even with Alpha's expert driving. In their hurry to reach the battlefield, they were still off-roading, and any attempt to speak astride the bucking motorcycle would have ended in Akira biting his tongue. Their ability to keep chatting regardless was one of telepathy's greatest advantages—and one which they were counting on for the battle to come.

This bike's control systems are made to interface with data terminals, so I had no problem taking it over, Alpha continued. *Still, considering it's meant for wasteland driving, I would have appreciated an onboard machine gun.*

You can mount a machine gun on a motorcycle? Akira asked, surprised. *I get what you mean about the control system, though. Bet it makes driving way easier.*

And not just driving. It can coordinate with onboard systems to automate things like aiming and reloading.

The advanced control systems on most Eastern vehicles were a boon to hunters working in the perilous wastes. Without them, it would have been impossible for a lone driver to operate a heavy tank bristling with armaments, for example.

And a control system makes a big difference on a motorcycle too, Alpha continued. *You can switch to automatic driving so that your bike will keep going or stop safely even if you nod off, and it also corrects your balance on uneven terrain. Though how much you get out of a system depends on its specs, of course.*

Never mind all that, Akira said. *Sticking a machine gun onto a motorcycle just seems crazy. How would you handle the recoil?*

A good control system has no trouble accounting for recoil while driving. It was a standard feature in the Old World, and I'm sure that a lot of hunters have access to similar tech even now. You could argue that switching to a car or a tank makes more sense, but that comes down to individual needs and preferences.

That was normal in the Old World? The more I learn, the scarier it sounds. Akira added visions of bike-mounted machine guns all over the place to his warped understanding of the long-vanished civilization.

You hunters can't be much better, since you're all so eager to sift through its ruins, Alpha quipped with a smirk.

You got that right.

As they rode on, the atmosphere of the surrounding wasteland gradually changed. Gunfire and explosions echoed, smoke rose, and the reek of blood and burning flesh and metal wafted through the air. In short, it felt like a battlefield.

Akira looked off toward the new sights and sounds. With Alpha's help, part of his view expanded and displayed additional information. He could see hunters still fighting against the horde of monsters attacking them. The predators swarmed about—a mix of mammalian, reptilian, and insectoid creatures, along with some beasts that seemed to combine traits of all three. Even the smallest was roughly one meter long, while the largest brutes measured over three. None could fly: they ran or crawled along the ground on four, eight, or even more legs as they charged.

The hunters fired their heavy weapons in response. A hail of bullets tore through their foes' pelts, scales, and exoskeletons and mangled the flesh beneath. Monsters fell, died, disintegrated.

So, that's the place. Not far now, Akira said, tensing as he braced himself for combat.

This will be your first actual battle in your suit, Alpha responded. *I'll be using it to give you my full support, so assume that it's always under my control from now on.*

Meaning it'll move on its own?

Exactly. You might find it disorienting, but keep a cool head no matter what happens. Try to remember our close-quarters combat training—this is pretty much the same thing.

Oh, that weird feeling. Got it. Akira recalled how he'd felt during his hand-to-hand combat drills, when he could hardly distinguish whether he or Alpha was moving the suit. His body had seemed to anticipate his mind, acting before he realized he wanted to.

I'll have to get pretty rough to fight that many monsters effectively, Alpha added. *I won't sugarcoat it—this will take a serious toll on you. Grit your teeth and put up with it, unless you'd rather turn back. Ready?*

Don't worry, Akira said earnestly. *Resolve is part of my job.*

Alpha gave him an encouraging smile. *Good. Let's go.*

Akira gripped the handlebars with his left hand and readied his AAH in his right. The bike was already under Alpha's sway, and she pushed its acceleration to its limits so that they closed in on the battlefield at top speed.

Akira trained his rifle on the monsters visible in the distance, not even really bothering to aim—Alpha moved his suit to do that for him, with such precision that he hardly felt he was riding a motorcycle. He squeezed the trigger, and a stream of bullets burst from his gun barrel, each one filling the air with a loud report. The barrage mowed down his targets with brutal efficiency, and he saw one monster after another crumple to the desert ground.

The recoil from the burst threatened to knock Akira off his motorcycle, but he clung on with suit-enhanced strength. The force thus passed to the bike, but Alpha adjusted the speed of the wheels' rotation to compensate. They went on firing as they drove, speeding past the corpses of the

monsters they had killed.

Woo-hoo! Akira shouted, caught up in the experience. The driving and marksmanship alike felt superhuman to him.

Sounds like you've gained a fresh appreciation of my flawless support, Alpha said with a smug laugh. *You'd better keep up with me, Akira.*

You bet!

With that, they plunged into the fray.

◆

Farther ahead in the wasteland, two trucks sat trapped among the scattered corpses of ravening beasts and the wreckage of hostile machines. The carnage testified to the hunters' valiant resistance, and they weren't done fighting yet.

Most of the monsters that had swarmed out of the Kuzusuhara Town Ruins were heading straight for Kugamayama City, so the municipal defense forces stood ready to engage most of the horde. Threats were scarcer on this battlefield, removed from the direct path of the swarm. The hunters aboard both trucks had assumed that joining forces with another patrol would be more than enough to weather the onslaught.

Then misfortune struck. The mob they'd encountered was full of hostile machines that packed serious firepower, launching massive shells at the trucks. The robotic monsters looked like someone had designed them as a joke, taking prone artillery pieces and jamming lots of multi-jointed legs on them. But those legs skillfully neutralized the recoil from the cannons. Their bombardment wasn't terribly accurate, but several shots found their marks—and took out the trucks' drivetrains and controllers.

Without transportation, the hunters had to hold their ground. Their desperate fight had paid off—somehow, they had repulsed the machines. But whether the things had been destroyed, fled, or merely withdrawn to resupply, the hunters didn't know. Now they had their hands full with the rest of the horde. They couldn't abandon the trucks and return to the city on foot because the bulky vehicles were their only shields from long-range attacks. The trucks also marked their position for any rescue parties that might come their way. And the hunters couldn't move their wounded, anyway.

With focused fire, the hunters had already dispatched any beasts tough enough to charge their positions. The remaining creatures prowled slowly around the trucks, hiding behind any corpses or wreckage that were still more or less in one piece while they looked for an opening. The hunters kept a wary eye out for enemy reinforcements while they continued the fight, but the situation was wearing on their nerves.

"How many have you brought down?" one hunter asked another as he scanned the area from his hiding place in a truck bed. He couldn't conceal his exhaustion.

"Can't be bothered to count, but it's a lot," the other replied, his fatigue equally obvious. "Shit. We'd better get credit for these kills."

"We will, if the truck's instruments are intact. Otherwise, they'll probably just divvy 'em up equally. And that's *if* we make it back alive. Where the hell's our backup?"

"Don't ask me. Hope the guy from the Office got the call out before that damn machine blew him away."

Beneath their grumbling lay an unspoken fear. For the moment, they still had energy to spare—their banter proved as much—but it was anyone's guess how long that would last. The monsters still had them pinned down, and there was no telling when more might show up. The hunters were too beleaguered to go on the offensive, and they all knew that their situation was steadily deteriorating.

Then the hunter keeping a lookout heard gunfire that didn't come from their group. He strained his eyes for its source, in case it heralded a new wave of gun-toting monsters, and spotted Akira mowing down beasts from his motorcycle.

◆

When Akira reached his destination, he stopped his bike and looked around. The remains of animals and robots littered a wide area around the trucks, he saw, but many threats were still moving.

There's so many, he said, scowling in spite of himself. *How are there still any left after all the ones they took out?*

I'm sure this is still only a small fraction of the swarm, Alpha responded, smiling confidently in contrast to his gloom. *Dead monsters are piled right*

up to the trucks, so I'd guess we're looking at a lull after a major clash.

If this is a lull, I can't imagine how bad things got when they were really going at it. Especially after the number of monsters we ran into on our way here.

It looks like the people here already took out the troublesome long-range fighters, so we'll just keep cleaning up the leftovers from a distance.

Yes, ma'am!

Akira raised his assault rifle without dismounting. Through his suit, Alpha shifted him into an optimal firing stance, accounting for the angle and weight of the motorcycle. The bulky carcasses of large monsters made it difficult for the hunters to fire on the remaining beasts, but Akira had a clear line of sight. He took aim from astride his bike and opened fire.

His Alpha-assisted marksmanship sent bullet after bullet into the monsters' most vulnerable spots: gaps between tough scales, fragile places between eyes, seams in armor plating, and joints all over their bodies. Animals howled in pain, while robots emitted strange noises as damage forced them to move in ways they weren't used to. Incapacitated monsters of both types toppled to the ground.

Part of the swarm shifted its attention from the hunters to Akira, who struck them as a greater threat. Akira kept his distance from them but never stopped firing.

This is a lot easier than that time with Katsuragi and Darius, he remarked. *Even with some monsters chasing after us now, this bike lets us fight while keeping our distance, so we don't have to worry about getting overwhelmed unless a lot more join in.*

Naturally—the other swarm included monsters from farther east, Alpha said. *We'll move once they get closer. You're on a motorcycle now, so we might as well make the most of it.*

Sure thing.

And so Akira continued his one-sided offensive, never allowing his enemies within striking distance.

◆

The sight of Akira's battle sparked a stir among the hunters.

"Is backup here?! How many?! Do they have cars?!"

“Just one?! Where’re the others?! Is he scouting ahead?!”

“One kid is all we get?! Is this someone’s idea of a joke?!”

Amid the commotion, one hunter raised his rifle and shot a beast that had leaped out of cover to pursue Akira. The brute died instantly as its head disintegrated in a shower of gore.

“Stop chatting and start shooting!” he snapped. “Now’s our chance!”

“But is that brat really supposed to be our rescue?!” someone yelled.

“Who gives a shit?! As long as we kill the rest of those things and get out of here alive, nothing else matters!”

His reprimand whipped the other hunters into action. They quickly opened fire to support Akira, who took positions that ensured either he or they always had a clear sight line on a group of monsters.

The hunters shot a lizard that leaped from cover to pounce on Akira as he rode by. Akira shot a small robot about to attack the hunters in the back. Caught in this irregular pincer attack, the monsters quickly fell. And because the hunters had never lacked for firepower, they soon had the area cleared of threats.

◆

One hunter came out to welcome Akira as he reached the trucks. The man looked a little surprised to see just how young their rescuer really was, but he showed the boy no disrespect. Hunting wasn’t about age, and in his opinion, at least, only amateurs judged a book by its cover.

It wasn’t unheard of for some hunters to feign youth to put opponents off their guard. Some preferred cyborg bodies with teenage exteriors, while other veterans relied on Old World drugs to keep themselves looking young. Most were not to be trifled with. Akira’s driving and sharpshooting had convinced the man that he fell into that category.

“Thanks for the assist,” he said. “You a hunter here to bail us out?”

“Yeah,” Akira replied. “I answered an emergency listing.”

“I see. I’m sorry to have to ask this, but would you sell us some medicine if you have any? We’ve got casualties.”

Several wounded hunters lay in the truck beds. Large pools of blood on the floor spoke to the severity of their injuries. Five full body bags already lay in one corner.

Akira took off his backpack and fished out a package of recovery capsules—one relic from the Kuzusuhara Town Ruins that he'd avoided selling. The man's brows furrowed when he saw what Akira had given him. He recognized its value, and he knew that medical supplies usually sold for more on the battlefield than off it. After all, the seller was giving up the chance to save their own life if they ended up in a tight spot.

"That's some fancy stuff you've got there," the man said, his expression clouding as he realized he might not be able to afford the asking price. "Listen, I hate to say this, but—"

"We can haggle later." Akira cut him short. "If worse comes to worst, you can have it for free. I came out here to save people, and letting 'em die would leave a bad taste in my mouth."

"Sorry. And thanks."

The man quickly began treating his comrades. He fed the medicine to some. In other cases, he opened the capsules to sprinkle their contents on the wounds, causing the hunters to cry out in even greater pain. The man knew how the medicine worked, though, so he ignored them and continued his treatment.

"Put up with it," he said. "It's this or death."

Another man came up to Akira. "Hey, are you the entire rescue party?" he asked. "Isn't anybody else coming?"

Akira hesitated, but neither silence nor lies would do him any good that he could see, so he answered levelly. "I just happened to be nearby when I took the job. I don't know if they sent anyone else."

The man took a moment to respond. "Oh" was all he said at last.

Akira, who had expected him to show more disappointment, was both surprised and impressed.

Wow, he said. *They're not even bothered that a kid like me is the only help they've got.*

They're not weak-willed enough to let a little brush with death rattle them, Alpha agreed. *Meaning they're not your run-of-the-mill hunters. I suggest you take notes.*

Good idea.

"Can't you ask your Hunter Office rep for a status update on your rescue party?" he asked.

"He's dead," the man answered. "A monster nailed him with an artillery

shell. You're here, so he must've sent out the request before he bit the dust. Shame he's not around to reap the benefits."

"Why can't you get out of here on your own?"

"The shells busted up the trucks. We can't do major repairs while we're under attack, and none of us know how, anyway. We were hoping whoever came to help could drive us back or tow one of the trucks, but..." The man grinned bitterly.

"Sorry," Akira said, matching his expression. "But taking a motorcycle got me out here way early—otherwise I would've had to run. Count your blessings and deal with it."

"That's a relief. Sounds like we had some luck left after all." The man laughed, taking Akira's explanation for a joke. Akira noticed, but he made no effort to correct the mistake. Had their positions been reversed, he probably would have thought the same.

Chapter 27: Cannon Insects

As Akira took a breather by the trucks alongside the hunters, a thought occurred to him.

Alpha, he asked, *when does this emergency job end?*

Your objective is officially the defense of the city, she replied. *I doubt it will end until the source of the threat is eliminated. Even if reinforcements show up here, they might just send the wounded back to Kugamayama and reassign the rest of us to other areas, depending on how the battle is going.*

So it all comes down to the big picture.

Especially in your case. Alpha gave a mocking little laugh. *You got that motorcycle as an advance, so they'll work you hard until you've done at least enough to earn it.*

Puzzlement flashed across Akira's face. *I got these people out of a scrape. Isn't that enough to cover a bike?*

Unfortunately, that's not for either of us to decide.

True. We'd better do enough to make sure they won't ask us to pay them the difference.

The trucks were too damaged to move, but their instruments were intact. The hunters were taking turns using the onboard scanners to monitor the area for threats. With no need to worry about surprise attacks, Akira was free to relax and chat with Alpha.

"Got a hit at two o'clock!" the current lookout cried.

Instantly, everyone was on edge. Was it a fresh wave of monsters or a rescue party? Hope and unease were plain on all their faces as they turned to look.

A man near Akira peered through his binoculars, praying all the while. Then his face fell when he spotted a familiar mass of hostile machines. So much for prayers.

"They're back!" he spat, grimacing.

"Who're 'they'?" Akira asked.

"The robots that wrecked our trucks. We chased 'em off once, but they

must've just gone for more ammo or something."

A swarm of massive cannons on legs was closing in from that direction. Each was the size of a compact car, and although mechanical, their limbs were obviously modeled on those of insects. Akira's expression turned grim when he spotted them too.

They're called cannon insects, Alpha noted. *Some Old World weapons factory that never went offline is probably still manufacturing them.*

Why would a weapons factory give them bug legs? Akira asked.

Maybe the AI overseer malfunctioned and read in some funny data. Or maybe it just got so bored that it's coming up with weird designs to entertain itself.

Bored? Akira repeated, frowning. *Is that all it takes?*

It may not sound like much of a reason to you, but boredom is a serious motivator when you have enough time on your hands. Alpha chuckled. *They're tank guns attached to multi-legged machine-gun platforms, which are their main bodies. There are individual differences, but they all have firepower on par with a tank's main gun. They don't carry many shells—only as many as their cannons can hold—but they seem to have support drones to keep them resupplied.*

Alpha was right. Supply drones like giant, mobile magazines accompanied the swarm. The cannon insects' armaments ranged from comically oversized artillery to arrays of many slender guns. The sizes of the moving platforms and the numbers of legs that supported them were equally diverse.

As weapons, however, the robots were united. The force halted its advance at a uniform distance from the trucks. Each machine then adjusted its many legs to skillfully angle its body and guns and began bombarding the hunters. Shells thundered down around the trucks, kicking up clouds of dust over the entire area and blowing away the field of monster remains.

The hunters quickly returned fire, but the shorter effective range of their weapons inevitably put them at a disadvantage.

"The damn things are hanging back," one grumbled. "They came a little closer last time."

The cannon insects continued to shell the party from a safe distance, sacrificing accuracy for the ability to maintain a unilateral offensive. The large group of supply drones accompanying them convinced the hunters

that they couldn't count on the monsters to run out of ammo.

Just to be certain, Alpha said, turning to Akira grimly, *you aren't willing to escape alone, are you?*

Akira looked equally strained, but his answer was clear: *Not until I'm the last one left.*

Then you'll need to get close enough to damage them with your AAH. The approach will be quite risky, even with my support. Alpha added earnestly, *If you do this, take recovery capsules ahead of time. You won't last without immediate healing when your muscles tear or your bones crack under the strain, and keeping up that level of overexertion is our best bet if we fight. Got all that? Ready to go?*

Akira remembered his training: how his suit forcing him to run had left him too exhausted and in too much pain to move for a while. Now Alpha was definitely talking about putting him through worse. Even so, he took the medicine out of his backpack, summoned his courage, and swallowed a large dose.

Alpha exhaled, then smiled fearlessly. *I take it your mind's made up?*

That's my job, remember? Akira wore the same expression.

"I'm gonna go in close and attack them," he called to a nearby man as he remounted his motorcycle. "Back me up if you can."

The man looked startled, but he didn't try to stop Akira—he could see that their situation would only get worse unless they tried something. So he just looked serious and said, "Will you be okay on your own?"

"I'm the only one with a bike, so I don't think it makes sense for anyone else to come along," Akira replied. "Splitting up should draw off some of their fire, and they won't hit me if I stay on the move—I hope. I'll be counting on you to cover me. See you." With that, he sped off.

The hunters had mixed feelings as they watched him go, but they sprang into action.

"Let's scatter and close in too!" one shouted. "Get the wounded out of the beds and into cover behind the trucks! If you've got grenades, don't be stingy with 'em!"

The hunters prepared themselves and advanced on foot through the rain of shells.

Akira raced across the wasteland toward the cannon insects. His speed

already seemed reckless, and he was still accelerating. Bits of monsters littered the whole area, and jagged wreckage and patches of blood-soaked ground made the going treacherous even for tires made to handle the desert terrain. But Alpha's extraordinary driving skills made short work of the rough ground.

On his swaying motorcycle, Akira kept his AAH steady and never stopped firing. His shots struck their targets but bounced harmlessly off the cannon insects. No surprise there—mechanical monsters tended to be tough, and he wasn't in effective range yet. Even so, his attacks provoked part of the swarm to target him instead of the hunters.

One insect, whose legs strained to support the massive cannon that made up most of its body, shifted its bulk to aim at Akira. Recoil rattled its massive frame, and a deafening roar shook the air as it fired.

The shell struck about ten meters off to Akira's side, and its impact showered the surrounding area with scattered chunks of monster flesh and metal. Akira felt its force on his skin and broke out in a cold sweat. A direct hit from that would be fatal.

We're safe, right?! he demanded. *They can't actually hit us?! I mean, that was pretty far off the mark!*

Our enemies have mismatched shell sizes and warped barrels, and that's interfering with their accuracy, Alpha said. *There was probably something wrong with their blueprint data. So, they won't have an easy time landing a hit on us.*

Great! Akira rejoiced, confident that he must be safe from the fierce artillery fire if Alpha said so. But his joy didn't survive her next words.

Inaccurate fire is also random, though. The unpredictable trajectories of their shots make it so hard to predict where shells will land that even I can't absolutely guarantee your safety. The rest is up to chance.

Don't jinx it! Akira snapped, unable to suppress a grimace. *I already used up all my good luck, remember?!*

Then pray that your bad luck isn't too much for me to handle. Your own choices got you into this mess—luck had nothing to do with that.

Oh, right! Akira's grin reeked of desperation. *If my luck's not the issue, then any hits we take are 'cause your support wasn't good enough!*

Oh really? If that's how you want it, then I'll need to amp up my support so you're even harder to hit. Hang in there.

What do you me—?!

Akira broke off as the motorbike suddenly sped up even more. Alpha guided it on a winding course to throw off the cannon insects' aim. As he gritted his teeth and struggled to endure the increasing strain, Akira bitterly regretted mouthing off to her.

The cannon insects reacted more noticeably as he closed in on them at breakneck speed, firing his rifle all the while. More and more machines turned on the lone hunter, and the hail of shells around him thickened. Akira's bike slalomed wildly to avoid them as it barreled closer to his foes.

Once Akira entered close range, the cannon insects ceased their high-angle fire and began to target him directly. Shells from their horizontal barrage passed just one meter to Akira's side. He heard the sounds of projectiles tearing through space at high speeds and felt the waves of air they pushed aside. He gritted his teeth and bit back the terror they inspired.

Hang on! I'm about to get a little rough! Alpha called, grinning boldly as soon as their targets were in range.

Sure thing! Akira smiled back, abandoning himself to fate.

Alpha turned the motorcycle at nearly a right angle, tilting it as far as it could go without toppling to counter the inertia from the sudden deceleration. She shoved Akira's left leg into the earth—leaving a furrow behind—to compensate for the strain. When the bike leaned so far that its wheels threatened to leave the ground, she forced the vehicle down with his right leg and maintained the wheels' traction. All the while, she kept a firm hand on the throttle.

Bursts of AAH fire peppered the cannon insects. The kick of the rifle passed through the rigid arm that held it and into the tilted body of the motorcycle, helping the vehicle to balance and speed up.

Akira's body was under constant, intense stress. His bones creaked and snapped. His muscles tore fiber by fiber. The capsules he'd swallowed before setting out began healing his injuries, but the strain caused fresh damage before the medicine could finish its work. Akira steeled himself against the searing pain as the cycle of injury and treatment repeated at the cellular level.

The motorcycle's turn slowed it dramatically, and the robotic weapons weren't about to pass up that opportunity. The entire swarm leveled its guns at Akira. But before the row of cannons opened fire, the bike's wheels

gripped the earth, propelling it straight to one side as it regained speed. The salvo of shells passed through where Akira had been mere moments before. He sped along the line of monsters, keeping up a steady stream of fire from his tilted motorcycle.

The cannon insects lacked rotating turrets, forcing them to turn their entire bodies toward their targets. Akira could unload bullets into his foes without concern until they adjusted their aim, and he focused his powerful fire on the supply drones that accompanied the walking artillery pieces. If he could take out the mobile magazines first, the remaining machines would be reduced to sitting ducks—albeit armored ones—as soon as they burned through their meager ammo reserves. So he decided to cut off the rain of shells at its source.

Alpha's expert marksmanship ensured that every bullet in Akira's rapid bursts found its mark in a vulnerable component of some machine. Some monsters toppled and writhed on the ground, their leg joints destroyed. Shots into the magazine-like drones triggered secondary explosions that took out nearby machines along with them.

The cannon insects' many legs maneuvered their bodies adeptly, turning their guns back to Akira with a rapidity that belied their bulk. They all fired at once, and a fusillade of shells whizzed past Akira, demolishing the landscape behind him.

Alpha! That was cutting it close! he screamed, his face contorted with pain and the wind from the blast.

My rough driving still kept them from hitting you. Or is that not good enough? she replied. *More importantly, how's your left leg?*

It hurts like hell. One more stunt like that and it won't just break, it'll tear off.

Then I'll have to use your right leg next time.

Couldn't we just not do that again?! Akira demanded.

Absolutely, Alpha said. *All you'd need to do is buy a bigger, better gun so that we can play it safer. You can handle heavy weapons now that you have a powered suit.*

So there's nothing I can do right now?! Akira glowered at Alpha, who responded with a smile.

I'm trying to take as few risks as possible, of course, but I won't hesitate when necessary. You got us into this mess, so don't start whining now.

Okay, you win! Akira snapped to take his mind off the pain. He didn't regret his decision, but that didn't make its results any less excruciating.

He continued zipping around the monsters, mostly taking down supply drones. His AAH couldn't do much to the armored cannon insects, but it packed just enough punch to demolish their more fragile escorts. He spotted one of the massive walking magazines trying to latch on to the back of a cannon insect to reload it and focused his fire on it. The magazine's cargo of shells exploded, wrecking both machines.

Yes! Akira beamed at his victory. *Bring on the next one! We've really thinned 'em out!*

We're making good progress, and the other hunters seem to be pulling their weight, Alpha said. *We might actually win if we keep this up.*

The walking cannons' shelling diminished as their supply drones fell. The hunters—all more heavily armed than Akira—were now close enough to join in the attack, rapidly thinning the monsters' numbers. Both they and Akira regained their confidence, certain that they had only to pick off the remaining supply drones and then take out their frustration on the helpless cannon insects by reducing the machines to scrap.

Just mopping up now. That was rough, but it worked out pretty well, Akira said, turning to thank Alpha for her support, even if they weren't quite finished. Then he grimaced as he saw Alpha's expression had reverted from a confident grin to a grim scowl.

Akira, she said, *some dangerous reinforcements just showed up.*

What now? he asked, annoyed.

As if in response, part of the answer to his question fell from the sky. A massive, long-range cannon shell blasted a crater in the battlefield. It had been aimed at Akira, but it landed so far from him and the hunters that it did more damage to the cannon insects. Yet the force of the weapon made up for its poor accuracy. The resulting explosion blew away any hope that Akira and the other hunters had the upper hand and left them painfully aware of the new threat.

Every cannon insect near the impact disintegrated into unrecognizable scraps. The ensuing shock wave flung the surrounding monsters over and sent them flying, even rattling the trucks off in the distance. The hunters who had stayed behind to guard the wounded cried out in surprise as airborne debris rained down around them. A direct hit from a shell like that

wouldn't disable the trucks—it would pulverize them.

Akira instinctively jerked his head around to look at the explosion and grimaced when he saw the devastation.

Akira, let me ask you again, just in case, Alpha said gravely, though she already knew what answer to expect and looked annoyed. *Are you sure you don't want to escape on your own?*

Akira's response was an earnest *No*. Even the blast had done nothing to change his mind.

Very well, then. Alpha mustered a grin, bold and cheerful. *Let's take it down.*

Once again, Alpha took control of Akira's body via his suit. He stowed his rifle and gripped the motorcycle's handlebars with both hands as the bike shot off at full speed. Alpha's peerless driving skills allowed it to maintain the maximum acceleration its specs would allow even in the rubble-strewn desert.

Alpha, why did we put my AAH away? Akira asked. It seemed like an odd decision when they were going after enemy reinforcements.

Because shooting won't accomplish anything at the moment, she replied. *Using both hands to make sure you don't fly off will do you more good than wasting ammo.*

Are we seriously gonna take on something that tough?!

We haven't got a choice—unless you'd like to run away after all? Alpha said mockingly, her unconcerned smile a stark contrast to Akira's panic.

I won't run, so you'd better back me up!

Leave it to me.

Just as Alpha made her self-assured pronouncement, the motorcycle went airborne. Another shell had struck behind them, blasting away the nearby debris. Gusts from the explosion pushed Akira forward. But with Alpha in control, the motorcycle kept its balance—in fact, it rode the shock wave to gain even more speed.

The bike accelerated through a series of wild turns to avoid the rain of debris following the explosion. Akira clung to the handlebars for dear life, his face twisted as he struggled to keep the shelling—or his ride—from shaking him loose.

Thanks to their reckless speed, Akira finally caught sight of their target. At this distance, the cannon insect launching the one-sided assault only

looked like a speck to the naked eye, but his Alpha-augmented vision enabled him to zoom in and pick it out clearly. He frowned when he realized that Alpha had been right about how little his AAH could do against the machine.

It's huge, he muttered.

Indeed, the cannon insect was gigantic. The many-legged platform at its core was the size of a large bus—if that bus had been stomped flat—and the powerful gun installed atop it was gargantuan. Anyone could see that no cheap bullets were going to bring down this crude mass of metal. It looked like someone had taken a comically oversized artillery piece and made it mobile in the most ham-fisted way possible. None of the smaller cannon insects made the same visual impact.

A vast stockpile of shells designed to fit the massive barrel accompanied the giant. Although they varied in size, the smallest was still twice as large as a human head and capable of walking on the many legs that sprouted from its underside. The mobile ammunition milled about the great machine, waiting to be loaded.

One shell flexed its legs and leaped onto the huge cannon insect, scurried along to the massive gun's breech, and inserted itself. *Boom!* The air shook. The blast threw up another vast cloud of debris that rained down over the desert landscape.

The great cannon suffered from abysmal accuracy because the shells didn't perfectly match its diameter. Yet a direct hit from it would mean certain death, and even the shock waves caused serious damage. Unless the shelling stopped—and soon—the hunters' luck would run out. And thanks to Akira's motorcycle, no other hunter could get within firing range of the monstrous cannon as quickly as he could.

Okay, Alpha, I get that my rifle won't put a dent in that thing, but how are *we gonna beat it?* Akira asked.

We'll get up close and figure something out, Alpha informed him.

Can't you be more specific?!

Yes, but are you really able to fight while listening to me explain right now?

As Akira drew close to the huge cannon insect, it began to shift from lobbing angled shots to direct fire. That meant it was more likely to hit the rubble strewn across the wasteland, of course, but it didn't care.

An enormous artillery shell tore a straight line through the mounds in its path—only to detonate before reaching its target. Scattered shock waves rolled forward. Debris, caught in the blast, fanned out ahead of it. Akira and his motorcycle came through unscathed—Alpha had swerved behind obstacles, dampening the shock waves—but the boy still winced when he saw the debris flying toward him through the air.

I'll shoot first and ask you questions later, he said. *We* can *scrap that thing, right?*

Of course, Alpha replied. *Now brace yourself—we're going in.*

Okay! I'm counting on you!

Akira steeled himself and did his best to move in sync with his suit as Alpha manipulated it. But although his efforts mitigated the strain on his body, dodging the shells and debris flying at them head-on required even more reckless maneuvers than evading attacks from above. Akira didn't have to worry about the driving, which he left to Alpha, but her maneuvers put him under even greater physical stress. He gritted his teeth and ignored his body's screams of agony.

The shelling had ripped up the landscape. He sped through the scarred terrain—sometimes swerving far around the center of a blast, other times weaving through a cloud of debris—as he closed in on the source of the onslaught. Charging at top speed, he cut straight through the zones of death that appeared one after another. Then, at last, he reached his target and got away from its line of fire.

The huge cannon insect was too bulky to make any quick movements. It would never catch Akira in its sights at close quarters as long as he kept moving faster than it could turn to target him. So the machine began shelling the hunters again, but Akira never slowed his approach.

He pulled up right beside the giant, rode straight at one of the walking artillery shells, and leaned his motorcycle into a sharp spin. The weight and momentum of the bike swept under the shell, smashing its legs and knocking it slightly off the ground. Akira kicked it higher and leaped off his motorcycle. Thanks to his suit's strength and Alpha guiding his ultra-precise movements, he followed the shell high into the air.

He caught up to it. Alpha highlighted it in his vision and barked, *Kick!*

Akira obeyed instinctively, following the lead of his suit. He let out a yell as he drove his leg into the projectile with all the strength he could

muster.

The suit and its wearer moved as one, multiplying the power of his kick. The shell went flying into the breech of the massive cannon. Forced into the opening, the shell interrupted the machine as it was trying to load a different projectile.

The massive cannon jammed. In that pause, Akira unslung his AAH in midair and opened fire at the shell. A stream of bullets slammed into it and triggered an explosion, which set off more shells. Even the huge cannon insect couldn't hold up against a chain reaction of that magnitude. The machine shut down as its gun and platform burst apart.

Akira didn't even have time to let out a victory cheer as he rode the explosion and landed perfectly astride his moving motorcycle. Seizing its handlebars, he revved the bike as fast as it would go, leaving the scene of the battle in the distance behind him.

Moments later, no longer able to serve as projectiles, all the remaining shells self-destructed. The massive explosion engulfed what remained of the giant machine. Not even that heavily armored monster could withstand the force of so many blasts, which instantly reduced it to countless flakes of scrap metal.

Retreating at top speed, Akira got clear just in the nick of time. The shock wave hammered on his back as he cruised through the wasteland and finally stopped his motorcycle at a safe distance.

All right, Akira, I took it out just like you asked me to, Alpha said with a smug grin. *Care to hear the details?*

No, I'm good, Akira replied, shaking his head and panting. *Just one question: is it safe to kick artillery shells?*

Not ordinarily. It's extremely dangerous because they might blow up in your face.

Why'd you make me do it, then?!

I selected a shell that wouldn't go off from a mere kick and struck it in a way that wouldn't cause an explosion. To be precise—

Don't be. I'm just glad you put some thought into it, Akira said, nipping her explanation in the bud. *How's the rest of the battle going?*

It looks like the others have wrapped up too.

While Akira was battling the giant machine, the other hunters had mopped up the remaining cannon insects. The news drew a deep sigh from Akira. More than any feeling of victory or accomplishment, he felt a sudden

surge of exhaustion.

So it's finally over, he said. *We managed, but I've had enough of dodging cannon fire for a lifetime.*

We would have had an even harder time without the motorcycle, Alpha commented. *I suppose you weren't quite ready for this yet.*

In terms of gear? Or skill?

Both. In fact, make that "everything."

That still wasn't good enough, huh? Akira sighed again. He had a powered suit, he had a motorcycle, and he had Alpha's support, which allowed him to use both suit and bike to full advantage. But his ability still fell far short of her demands.

Everyone would have it easy if you could toughen up overnight. Alpha gave a smile of encouragement. *Keep working on it.*

Akira chuckled, getting over his gloom. *Good point. Hard work's the only way, so I'll take it.* He paused. *Anyway, how much do you think I'll make on this job? I'd like to think it'll pay well after all this work, but you never know.*

I'm sure it will pay for a bath. You've earned a rest today, so make the most of it.

Yeah, good idea!

When Akira returned to the truck after a short breather, he found the other hunters waiting for him.

"Nice work," one of them said. "I figured you were just going to play decoy when you charged off with nothing but an AAH, but then you even went and took out that giant."

"It's a great gun," Akira responded.

"You a big AAH lover, by any chance?" the man asked, apparently satisfied with the offhand answer. "Done any modding on that one?"

"A lover?" Akira repeated. "Well, I do like using it, although I haven't done much modding. I picked it up from a friend's store."

"Then that store owner might be an AAH maniac, selling modded rifles on the sly. They try to win their favorite gun more fans that way. 'Course, I can see why people go crazy for that rifle when hunters like you favor it. I guess it's famous for a reason."

Alpha, what's an AAH lover? Akira asked, mystified by the man's response.

Someone who loves the AAH assault rifle, I assume, she replied.

Well, yeah, but that's not what I mean.

Investigate on your own if you're so curious. Consider it part of your training.

Fine.

Akira was still feeling nettled when a different hunter approached him hesitantly and said, "Excuse me, but we've got fresh casualties, and we used up all our medicine a while ago. Would you sell us a little more if you've still got some to spare?"

"Sure. I think I have a bit left." Akira set down his gun, unshouldered his backpack, and dug out another package of recovery capsules. Just when he was about to hand it over, his worst misfortune of the day struck. Without warning, the monster lying right beside Akira and the hunters attacked.

The hardy behemoth had charged the trucks, shrugging off gunfire until a fierce assault had downed it at point-blank range. The hunters had left it for dead but hadn't had time to confirm every kill in the midst of a life-or-death battle. Unbeknownst to them, the beast merely lay unconscious. And once it came to its senses, it instinctively launched itself at the nearest human—Akira.

Akira tried to fire at the creature, then realized that he wasn't holding his rifle. He considered scrambling to pick it up, and that unnecessary thought further delayed his movements. His reactions were fatally slow. The monster's gaping maw already filled his view.

I won't make it in time! he thought. *I'm done for!*

In a slow-motion world, Akira recognized his own death.

Then his powered suit moved on its own, bringing his right leg up as it pivoted on his left. The suit's output was raised to the limit, with no regard for its wearer's well-being. For just an instant, it outperformed its specs.

Akira's right high kick slammed into the beast's head with a force that could smash rubble. But that wasn't enough to kill the creature. It staggered but didn't fall, merely stunned by the shock to its head.

In that brief window of opportunity, Akira's body snatched up his AAH. As it did so, Akira got over his confusion. He immediately jammed the assault rifle into the monster's mouth and squeezed the trigger, unleashing a burst that struck the beast's head from the inside. The wound was fatal. Still, the behemoth's astonishing vitality prolonged its death, and only after

Akira emptied his magazine did it finally crumple to the ground and lie forever still.

Th-That was you in control, right? he asked, huffing.

Yup, Alpha replied. *Now hurry and heal yourself before your suit shuts down.*

Before it does what*? Is it broken?*

I drained almost all the energy it had left to briefly push it past its limits. It guzzles power like you wouldn't believe, but we had no options. The suit's limiters would normally have prevented the maneuver for the wearer's safety. Alpha had taken over its control system and overridden that check. *Pushing your suit that hard might have caused a breakdown, so we'll have to check it for that later.*

Akira sat down. Pain was coursing through his whole body. His right leg hurt the worst of all. *Is my leg broken?*

I hardened your suit as much as I could, but it wasn't designed as armor, so that only did so much, Alpha said. *Now get moving. You won't be able to walk back unless you heal it soon.*

Somehow, the exhausted Akira fished some medicine out of his backpack. *You just want me to swallow these like normal, right? I know I've got a broken bone, but I don't wanna cut my leg open to sprinkle some in there.*

You might have to when push comes to shove, but straightening out the bone and then swallowing the capsules will be enough this time. It will take some time to heal, but we should be able to afford that now. Would you like me to align the bone for you?

Akira hesitated. *Yes please.*

Akira's hands gripped his right leg of their own accord. His suit partially deactivated, becoming as flexible as when he changed in or out of it, as his hands began forcing the broken bone back into its proper alignment.

Akira gritted his teeth against the agony, then gulped down every recovery capsule left in the package. While the medicine numbed his pain, he felt the healing nanomachines flocking to his right leg.

As he crumpled the empty box, his eyes met those of the man he'd just been speaking to. A quick search of his backpack revealed that his stock of medicine had dwindled considerably. After considerable soul-searching, he removed one package and handed it over. But the hunter passed it right

back to him.

Seeing Akira's look of confusion, the man laughed. "I can't accept this if it means making someone who's done so much for us look so glum. Especially not after you already gave us a box."

"You're sure?" Akira asked.

"Yeah. Our wounded aren't hurt *that* bad. They should pull through if we let them rest." At that point, more hunters rushed over, drawn by the gunfire. The man shouted, "One of these monsters was only knocked out! If you spot any with their heads intact, put a few bullets in 'em just in case!"

The others rushed to check the remaining bodies for threats. All of them, Akira included, had relaxed, assuming the battle was over, and they found it hard to go on the alert once more.

◆

With the cannon insects defeated, the hunters waited for rescue. Akira was resting on account of his injuries, while the others kept watch on their surroundings. But no one complained about him or called him a slacker—they knew how much they owed to him.

In fact, Akira was already preparing for the next battle, though he wished there wouldn't be one. But the world didn't care what he wanted, so he had to be ready. He replaced his suit's energy pack so it wouldn't give out and leave him with just a heavy outfit. Next, he swapped out his AAH's magazine, fully loaded it, and fastened spare magazines to his body. By the time he finished, his leg was just about healed. He was more or less fit for another fight.

He looked into his backpack and sighed heavily when he saw what little remained of his ammo and medicine. *I sure burned through this stuff. Better stock up when I get back*, he grumbled. *I* will *get paid for this, right?*

Alpha smiled to lift his spirits. *I don't know how much that motorbike cost, but I can't imagine it's worth more than all the fighting you've done. Don't worry. It'll work out.*

Yeah, I guess so. Akira ignored what she'd said earlier—that they didn't get to decide how much their work was worth. He felt better this way.

As the sun set, the long-awaited rescue team arrived at last and got ready

to tow the crippled trucks back to Kugamayama. Akira was standing astride his bike, waiting for them to wrap up, when Kibayashi came up, waving gleefully.

"Sonofa—! You're alive!" the official called. "They told me you went absolutely *nuts* out there. I honestly figured you for a goner, but I guess my judgment's not what it used to be. But I still got one thing right—you really are crazy, reckless, and rash!"

"Thanks for the bike," Akira said. "It really came in handy."

"Glad to hear it, especially if it helped you go wild. Makes giving it to you worth the trouble."

"Oh, I almost forgot: what do I have to do to close out this emergency job? Does it last until they're back in the city?"

"Right, right. Gimme a sec." Kibayashi whipped out his data terminal and tapped something into it. "There. I just marked your job complete. You're free to go."

"That's it?" Akira asked. "I don't have to guard them on the way back or anything?"

"Nope. Your job's done, and we're out here on a different rescue mission. The city defense forces wiped out the swarm from the Kuzusuhara Town Ruins, so we can spare the personnel to help other hunters now."

"Oh, okay."

"Wanna sign on to this rescue job too, since you're already here? I'll handle the paperwork if you do."

Akira gave a tired shake of his head. "Nah. If my job's done, I'll head straight home. I'm running low on ammo—not to mention dead tired."

"Shame. I was hoping I'd get to see you let loose up close if we ran into more trouble on the trip back."

"Give me a break. I'll catch you later."

"Careful on your drive home. When you die, go out in a blaze of glory—crazy, reckless, and rash!—not in some stupid motor accident."

Kibayashi was in high spirits—tiring Akira even further. The boy breathed a sigh and rode off toward the city ahead of the group.

◆

After the official watched Akira go, a colleague approached him to

report.

“Kibayashi, we finished uploading the combat evaluation data. The trucks’ drivetrains bore the brunt of the damage, so their instruments should be working just fine. Still, there’s some strange data mixed in with their records.”

“Strange how?” Kibayashi asked.

“I’m not sure what to make of it. It shows one hunter behaving strangely—taking absurd risks. Ridiculous stunts, like charging into groups of monsters alone or taking a huge-looking thing in close-quarters combat without firing a shot. There might be something wrong with the scanners.”

Kibayashi burst out laughing. “Listen to what the others say and find out if the data matches,” he ordered, grinning from ear to ear. “Scratch that—I’ll ask them myself. Don’t write it off as junk or delete it without my say-so. And send the data my way; I’ll personally check it later. Get everyone moving back to the city as soon as everything’s ready.”

“Understood.” The official went back to preparing for the trip.

“Man, he went so wild that people don’t believe the data,” Kibayashi muttered happily to himself. Nothing could dampen his mood now. “This is great! I haven’t seen a hunter that exciting in ages!”

◆

Alpha drove Akira back to the city with her flawless precision, chatting with him and privately reflecting on his ambiguous motivations.

First, Akira had rescued Elena and Sara—perfect strangers—and then felt bothered by their thanks. Next, he had ignored the emergency listing—until he learned they might be involved. Then he had set off for a battleground where he wasn’t likely to find them.

The closest label Alpha could put on his strange, apparently illogical actions was “whim.” Yet she realized that Akira’s vagaries were not random, like a flip of a coin or roll of the dice. And until she knew exactly what drove them, she would continue to observe and to consider. All to predict, guide, and control him. To mold his actions—his very thoughts—to her own ends.

Chapter 28: Ten Billion Is Still Pocket Change

The plaza where the hunters gathered to run patrols was now packed with those returning from emergency jobs. Some celebrated with their comrades, injured but glad to be alive, while others lamented their losses. Akira saw he wasn't the only one who'd fought hard. Now that he was back where he'd started from, his survival felt real, and he allowed himself to relax at last.

All's well that ends well, he said. *A lot happened, but it's finally over.*

Well done. Alpha smiled encouragingly. *Call it a day and get some rest.*

Good idea. It's been ages since I took a nice, long soak. He grinned, already imagining his bath, but Alpha nipped his hopes in the bud.

Bad news, Akira. She grimaced.

Akira didn't like the sound of that. *What?*

They haven't deposited your pay yet, so you can't afford a room with a bath tonight.

Wh-What do you mean? Akira demanded, perplexed and dismayed.

Apparently, so many people signed up for the emergency jobs that it's taking longer than usual to calculate everyone's earnings. Check your work history for the details.

Akira hurriedly got out his data terminal and pulled up the page, which told him Alpha was right.

And after all that work, he groaned, his head drooping.

I'm sure they'll pay you by tomorrow, Alpha said, trying to cheer him up. *And a bath would be dangerous when you're this exhausted—you'd fall asleep in it. So hold out for one more day.*

Grumbling wouldn't do him any good, he told himself, so he forced himself to take her point of view and muttered, *Fine.*

Anyway, Akira, what are we going to do about your motorbike? We can't afford a hotel with a garage, and someone will steal it if you leave it parked

on the street. Maybe you should sleep sitting on it tonight.

Alpha had a point, and Akira frowned in thought. He was dead tired. He didn't want to spend another night on the streets, but he didn't want to lose his bike either. Hotel management probably wouldn't take it kindly if he folded it up and carried it to his room. After racking his brains, he came up with a solution.

I know. We'll leave the bike at Sheryl's place. She asked me to show my face there more often, and if I use it as a garage, I'll be visiting every time I get my bike out.

With that, he drove straight for Sheryl's base.

◆

Lying in her room, Sheryl was on the point of sleep when she heard the loud knock. Whoever it was sounded frantic, so she reluctantly climbed out of bed and made her way to the door.

"What do you want? I was about to turn in," she said. Her tone conveyed exactly how annoyed she felt that someone had interrupted what promised to be a good night's sleep.

"Boss! Akira's here!"

All at once, Sheryl was fully awake. She realized why they had woken her up now—the kids in her gang were too scared to handle Akira without her. She dressed hurriedly and ran to meet the hunter, who she found waiting near the entrance with a motorcycle.

After a moment to catch her breath, she cheerfully greeted him. "Thank you for waiting. Please, come in."

"Right here is fine," he responded. "Sorry to drop in so late, but I need a favor."

"Name it. I'll do anything I can for you."

Sheryl's confident smile put Akira a bit off-balance. The last time he'd seen her, she'd acted odd—but that was a while ago, and he figured she'd have gotten over whatever it was. Yet her behavior now struck him as even stranger. Maybe she was normally like this, and he could expect her to have such an attitude from now on? But he was too tired to worry for long. He turned to his immediate business.

"I'd like you to keep an eye on this motorcycle," he said. "I'll come pick

it up when I need it."

"I understand. It's safe with me. Do you need anything else? If not, would you come inside? I can at least offer you a cup of coffee."

Sheryl clasped Akira's hands as if it were the most natural thing in the world and stared happily into his eyes. He sensed a strange intensity in her smile, her affectionate gaze, the pressure of her hands on his, and the casual way she tried to pull him toward her. Flustered, he pulled free of her grip.

"No thanks," he said. "It's getting late, so I'll head back to my hotel. I had an exhausting day."

He meant it partly as an excuse, but mentioning his fatigue made him acutely aware of it. There was nothing feigned about his look of exhaustion—he was so tired that his suit was practically the only thing keeping him on his feet. Sheryl picked up on that and let him go.

"Oh, that's too bad," she said, imbuing her words with regret. "I haven't gotten to see you in ages, so I have a lot to tell you."

"I'll be back soon," Akira responded. "Bye."

"Goodbye. I'll be waiting." Sheryl looked lonely, although she still saw him off with a smile.

Akira realized she had thrown him off his stride. Still, it seemed to him she was doing better than last time, and he was tired. He let his worries go and headed back to his hotel.

Sheryl ordered the boy standing guard to move Akira's motorcycle inside the base. "This goes without saying, but treat it with care," she added. "Make sure everyone knows it's Akira's, and tell them to keep their hands off it. And really, be careful. You know what will happen if you lose or damage that bike, right?"

"Yeah, loud and clear." The boy nodded, nervously imagining the worst-case scenario.

"I'm going to bed now." Sheryl gave him a gentle, charming smile. "Good night, and good luck."

The boy flushed, well on his way toward falling for her. She noted his reaction and headed back to her room. There, she smiled for the mirror, holding the expression just long enough to study it.

"It works," she mused, "but not on Akira. Or did I just not see it working?"

Sheryl knew she was beautiful. With looks like hers, she could captivate

someone merely by smiling, holding their hands, and staring into their eyes. But not Akira. A simple test on the guard proved that her technique was effective. She *knew* it. But it annoyed her that Akira remained unmoved.

"I must have a lot to work on," she muttered as she climbed into bed.

◆

The next day, Akira awoke late from a deathlike sleep in his hotel room. His cheap, cramped hotel room that didn't even have a bath. His gaze wandered groggily until it met Alpha's. She was standing at his bedside and smiling down at him.

"Alpha," he said. "Morning."

Good morning, Akira, she replied. *Your pay for yesterday is in your account now. Check it if you're curious.*

Akira was still sleepy, but curiosity got him up and moving, albeit a little slower than usual. He picked up his data pad, navigated to his résumé page, and checked the payment field.

Suddenly, he was alert.

"Twelve million aurum?!"

He couldn't believe his eyes. But another look confirmed that he had read the amount correctly. For a few moments, he remained stunned. He had received his base pay for the emergency job, plus a reward for repelling two waves of monsters, a bonus for the number of hunters he had rescued, and compensation for the medicine he had given them. Subtracting the cost of the motorcycle—his advance payment—left him with a grand total of twelve million aurum. The page included a detailed breakdown, but he felt too overwhelmed to read it.

I suppose it could be better, considering you almost died to earn it, Alpha remarked glumly.

Akira snapped back to reality, wondering whether he had really gotten his due. But the ordeal of the previous day's battle and the number of digits in his payment were both too much for him to wrap his head around.

"I mean, yeah, I risked my life and almost lost it," he muttered. "And the other hunters used even more ammo than I did. But that doesn't mean—"

Let's take today to spend this pocket change on new gear, Alpha said, sending all his worries out the window.

“Pocket change?!”

Don’t act shocked every single time.

“Easy for you to say. If twelve million’s still ‘pocket change,’ what would I have to make for you to call it more than that?”

Ten billion is still pocket change, as long as you’re getting paid in aurum.

“What do you mean?” Akira wondered, so bemused he forgot his concern from a moment before.

That would take a long time to explain, Alpha replied. *We’ll stop by Cartridge Freak later to resupply on ammo and update your arsenal. While we’re there, ask Shizuka about gear that you can’t buy with aurum. I’m sure she’ll tell you all about stuff that chump change can’t get you. We’ll head out as soon as you’re ready, so what do you say about breakfast?*

Her suggestion made Akira painfully aware of his empty stomach. He had been too tired to eat anything before falling asleep the previous night.

“Good idea,” he said, and set his doubts aside as he began preparing breakfast. Little mattered more than a meal when he was this hungry.

“Akira, welcome!” Shizuka called when he entered her shop, waving from behind the counter as usual. “How is your powered suit? Are you finding it useful?”

“Yes, it’s an even bigger help than I imagined,” he replied.

Shizuka smiled, glad to see Akira looking well. When she had seen the reports of a monster attack large enough to draw out the defense forces, she had worried for his safety, especially after hearing hunters had been killed and wounded during the fight. Something had told her he must have been involved, but she now decided—to her great relief—that her fears had been unfounded.

Not in her wildest dreams did she imagine he had fought in defense of the city, maxing out his powered suit, and lived to tell the tale. She assumed he just meant some minor monster-extermination job that he had taken to test his new equipment. Otherwise, she would never have responded with a joke.

“I’m glad to hear it,” she said. “I wouldn’t want a regular-in-the-making like you to die because I sold you a dud. Make sure you survive and buy more gear so I can keep turning a profit.”

“I’m another step closer to being a regular customer today,” Akira said with a touch of pride. “I’m here to buy a backup AAH, so I’m not in hot water if mine ever breaks.”

“Sure, one AAH assault rifle it is.”

“And could you recommend a gun that’s good against mechanical monsters?” he added. “Something heavy, now that I’ve got my suit.”

“A gun for fighting machines? There are a lot of options, but it also depends on your budget. How much are you willing to spend?”

“Up to ten million aurum, including the AAH.”

Shizuka’s smile froze in shock. With a somewhat worried expression, she asked, “Just to be clear, how would you be paying for this? I’d love to sell to you, but I am running a business, so I can’t accept payment in installments. Or is that your credit limit with the Hunter Office?” Sternly, she added, “Akira, I know that installment plans can make things easier to budget for, but you shouldn’t get too comfortable with them. At the end of the day, a loan is a loan, so I don’t recommend it.”

“Don’t worry. I can pay in a lump sum,” Akira answered casually.

A change came over Shizuka’s expression. She still smiled kindly, but Akira felt intimidated as she put the pieces together. “I see. You got your powered suit three days ago. And I believe you said you were giving up dangerous hunting until you got it. That left you just three days to work with. Akira, how did you earn that money?”

Then he remembered his promise to Shizuka that he wouldn’t take any unnecessary risks.

“W-Well, you see...” he began, flustered and defensive.

“Yes?”

“I f-fought a bunch of monsters on a patrol job yesterday—it was a complete accident—and that’s what I got paid for it. I had no idea I was going to turn such a big profit.”

“So, you were reckless?”

“I mean, I was just so desperate to stay alive that—”

“You were reckless, weren’t you?” Shizuka’s intensity brooked no argument.

Akira fell silent for a moment, then gave in and admitted, “Yes.”

“And you’re all right? You aren’t hurt, are you?” Shizuka demanded, her face drawn with concern. “I hear the defense forces were hard-pressed

yesterday."

"I'm fine. Just look at me."

"So, you helped to hold the line?"

Recklessness took various forms, but the line of defense was far riskier than most. The boy who had tried and failed to gloss over that fact didn't hide his reaction, nor did the woman who had picked up on it. Akira's expression stiffened, while Shizuka's grew even more concerned.

"Are you *sure* you're not injured?" she asked.

"I...I'm fine. I'm not wearing my suit because I got hurt so badly I can't walk without it, or anything like that." Akira wasn't lying. He *was* fine—at least for the present. Yet Shizuka's stare was too intense for him. "M-My right leg took a beating," he confessed, "but nothing medicine couldn't fix. It's all healed up now."

Shizuka sensed Akira was still hiding something vital, and she grew more worried than ever.

"Come with me!" she commanded, marching Akira behind the counter. "Let me check under your suit. You'd better not be covered in bandages or something."

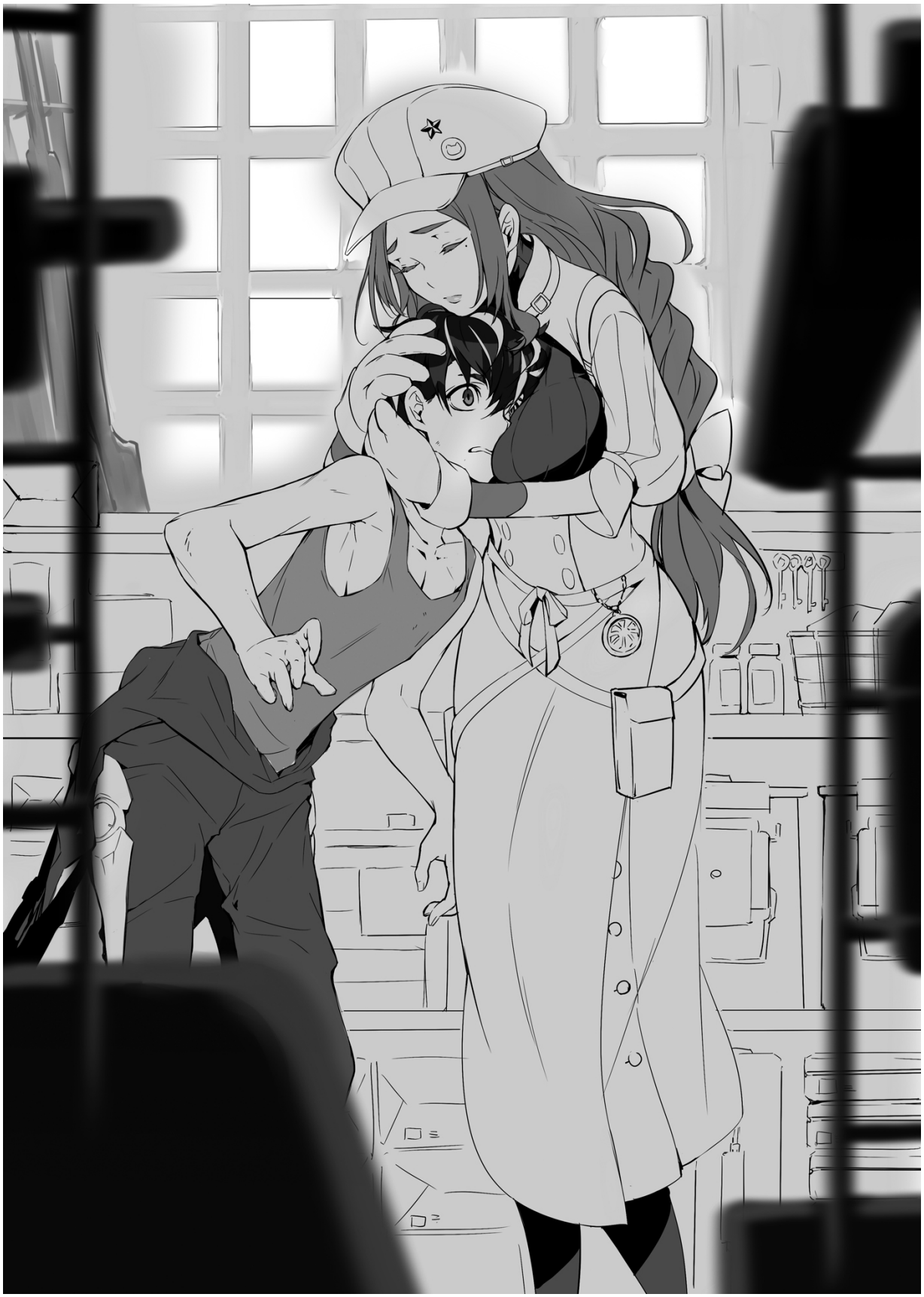
"I told you, I'm fine," Akira protested. "I'm all healed up."

"Then you won't mind showing me. Strip down!"

Swept along by Shizuka's energy, Akira peeled off his suit. His body was neither wrapped in bloody bandages nor dotted with fresh wounds. The copious doses of recovery capsules had left no trace of his broken leg or the bruises caused by his suit.

Shizuka breathed a sigh of relief and threw her arms around him. "Don't act so secretive if you're all right—you'll just make me worry more."

"S-Sorry." Akira accepted the hug without protest, blushing as Shizuka pressed his face to her bosom. Inwardly, he felt relieved that he had concealed how he had answered an emergency listing alone and even tried to charge into battle on foot. That kind of behavior—crazy, reckless, and rash to the extreme—would certainly get him in trouble if Shizuka found out.



Akira and Shizuka returned to the counter, where she placed the first item in his order before him.

"One spare AAH," she said. "Now for a gun that will be effective against mechanical monsters. I suppose yesterday's battle gave you that idea. Would you tell me about it while I think?"

"All right." Akira recounted his fight against the cannon insects, omitting quite a few details. Even so, he admitted to weaving through the rain of cannon fire to help the other hunters destroy the supply drones that his AAH could just barely bring down.

"I see," Shizuka said, shocked by what she heard. "That certainly was risky. Still, you couldn't escape, so I suppose you had no other choice."

"Yeah," Akira replied. "Anyway, that got me thinking that I'd like a weapon that will work on tougher robots."

"In that case, I recommend a CWH anti-materiel rifle or a DSS sniper rifle. They both take generic armor-piercing ammunition, so they're highly effective against more durable monsters. What matters more to you: range or stopping power?"

"Power, please. I want to explore ruins, and they're full of so many twists and turns that range doesn't count for much."

"In that case, I'd choose the CWH with armor-piercing ammo. It takes normal cartridges too, but you should stick to armor-piercing if you'll be using it in tandem with an AAH."

Shizuka added that expensive, proprietary ammunition could easily take down monsters that would pose a challenge to generic products and suggested that Akira purchase a few rounds, just in case. In the end, he bought everything she recommended and also stocked up on consumables.

"Is there anything else you think I should pick up?" he added as an afterthought.

"Let me think," Shizuka replied. "If you're looking for things that might come in handy at some point, there are too many to list. Why not buy a good-luck charm while you're at it?"

She meant it as a joke, but Akira proved unexpectedly receptive.

"Done," he said.

Firearms were Shizuka's main stock in trade, although she also sold consumable goods to hunters and would order body armor and other gear if asked. Charms, however, were outside her expertise. Yet the earnest

expectancy on Akira's face and the determination in his voice made it impossible for her to admit that she had been kidding.

"Wait just a moment," she told him and flashed a tense smile before vanishing behind the counter. She felt a tinge of panic as she faced her storeroom, which doubled as a delivery entrance, and began searching through the guns, ammunition, and other assorted merchandise it contained.

"Where did I put it?" she muttered. "And is it even in here? I don't remember throwing it out to make space, so it should still be gathering dust somewhere, but—aha! Found it!"

Her prize was a cardboard box tucked away in a corner. A thick layer of powder showed that it had lain untouched for quite some time. Shizuka gently dusted the box off and opened it to reveal a small object.

Hunters retrieved all sorts of relics from the ruins, but not all relics fetched high prices. Advanced precision machinery and medical supplies were valuable because they were difficult or impossible for current technology to replicate, but not so with less extraordinary goods. The Hunter Office exchanges would not buy even the most masterful of paintings if it consisted only of common paper and ink—they were only interested in technological value.

Many hunters brought such otherwise unsalable items elsewhere. Some hoped that other merchants would make them an unexpected offer for the goods, while others gave out their finds as souvenirs from the ruins, tossed them in as freebies to sweeten deals, or just passed them on because it was better than throwing them away.

Cartridge Freak had accumulated its fair share of such unwanted relics, and Shizuka had stashed any that failed to catch her interest in the storeroom—in this cardboard box, in fact. She remembered seeing something like a charm among the detritus.

"Thank you for waiting," she said, returning with a handful of likely candidates. "This is all I have. Would you like one?"

Akira earnestly inspected the objects arrayed on the counter, but he had no idea what to look for in a charm. "Which do you recommend?" he asked.

"Charms are outside my field of expertise," she replied, "but all these supposedly come from ruins. I have no plans to stock any more, and I can't guarantee they work. They're really just for peace of mind. So if you ask me, just pick whichever strikes your fancy."

Akira groaned as he mulled over the problem. Then Alpha pointed to one and said, *This one gets my vote.*

Why? Akira responded. *Just out of curiosity.*

It's engraved with a lucky number. An Old World gambler probably carried this for luck. And relic hunting is pretty much a game of chance, so I'd say it's perfect for you.

"I'll take this one," Akira said, pointing to the charm Alpha indicated.

"All right," Shizuka replied. "I can't guarantee its quality, so consider it a freebie. Wait just a moment while I get the rest of your order."

While Shizuka fetched the remaining items, Akira examined his new charm with interest.

Alpha, he said, *you called this a lucky number. What does it stand for?*

This number signals a windfall when it appears, so it brings good luck with money, she explained. *That's pretty much it.*

I see.

Even in the Old World, people had needed money enough to want charms like this. Akira had assumed that the ancient civilization was beyond anything he could imagine, and the unexpected similarity to his own circumstances amused him.

"Thanks for waiting," Shizuka said, returning with the rest of his order. "Do you have time for me to give you the rundown on these?"

"Yes, please," Akira replied.

"All right," said Shizuka. "The CWH is mainly used against heavily armored robotic monsters..."

She cheerfully launched into a lengthy lecture, explaining that the CWH anti-materiel rifle was designed to combat even more durable targets than other hunter weapons were. Most mechanical monsters were autonomous weapons or security systems, built far tougher than their organic counterparts. Putting up a decent fight against them meant piercing their shells of sturdy armor and rigid metal. The CWH aimed to punch through those tough exteriors and damage the machines' comparatively fragile internals.

Armor-piercing rounds could destroy control systems, disabling robots while leaving them relatively intact. To the hunters who fought the machines for their parts and turned a bigger profit the less damage they inflicted, that made anti-materiel rifles more efficient than grenades. Some

fans of the CWH even made their living hunting the stray tanks that roamed the wasteland. They used proprietary ammunition to disable a vehicle's control system, leaving it otherwise unscathed, and then towed it back to a factory for repairs before selling it off.

In short, hunters had a lot of options for tangling with massive war machines, but the CWH anti-materiel rifle's exceptional performance always made it a go-to choice.

"Proprietary CWH ammunition is expensive, but it's also guaranteed to get the job done," Shizuka continued. "You can bring down some enormous machines with it if you're confident in your sharpshooting and know their construction inside and out. A single shot can turn the tables on an armored target." After going over the benefits, she added a warning: "I shouldn't have to tell you this, and I doubt you need me to, but don't go looking for one of those giants."

"Of course. I'll play it safe," Akira said with a firm nod.

"Good." Shizuka returned the gesture, satisfied. "And never use those proprietary rounds with any other gun, even if they seem to fit. At worst, they could explode and take your arm clean off. Don't even think about it. Let's see... I think that's everything you need to know about your purchases."

Her lecture over, Shizuka cast about for something else to discuss. "Do you have any other questions? I don't mind telling you about other guns, especially if it makes you want to buy more."

"In that case," Akira answered after a moment of thought, "would you tell me about AAH lovers?"

"AAH lovers?" Shizuka repeated with an inscrutable expression. Then, with a faraway look in her eyes, she smiled and said, "Akira, you're too young for that."

Akira realized that he'd asked an awkward question, although he didn't see what was so odd about it. "That's not why I'm asking," he hastily explained. "One of the hunters I fought with yesterday mentioned them, so I got curious. He assumed that you or I had to be one of those 'lovers' when he saw my rifle."

"He did? Then you must have done something to really impress him, even if only by coincidence."

"So, doing impressive things will get me mistaken for an AAH lover?"

“How should I put this? It’s complicated.” Shizuka grinned ruefully at the puzzled boy as she tried to explain.

Guns of all shapes and sizes competed for buyers in the East. Some stayed on the market for a long time, while others vanished after a fleeting moment of popularity. The AAH assault rifle had survived that struggle for a century, and its reasonable price and excellent performance ensured that its popularity was still riding high.

The enthusiasts known as AAH lovers were exceptionally dedicated to the weapon—so dedicated that their ends and means sometimes swapped places. Those who fought monsters in order to use their AAHs, or who modified the rifle into unique and powerful weapons far removed from its original specs, were just the tip of the iceberg. Some even hunted monsters well out of the AAH’s league—making up with skill what they lacked in firepower—solely to raise the reputation of their favorite weapon.

Even AAH fans came in different stripes. Some opposed all modifications, seeking out effective strategies using only the rifle’s base specs. Others approved changes that stayed faithful to the AAH’s original design or kept its key components. Still others used and developed novel parts to enhance the weapon’s performance. Some didn’t care what was inside a rifle as long as it looked like an AAH. These factions sometimes squabbled and sometimes cooperated, but they always strove to make new fans of the weapon they loved.

AAH lovers, it was said, tended to have intense personalities. And while many were capable hunters, their proselytizing efforts also made them difficult to work with.

Akira reflected on his actions the day before. It was no wonder that the other hunter had mistaken him for a fanatic after he had praised the AAH and charged into a swarm of machines armed only with the rifle.

“A lot of AAH lovers are corporate employees,” Shizuka added. “I’ve heard of them skillfully talking up the AAH to customers or slipping high-spec modded rifles into shipments to make more converts. Oh, and just to be clear, I’m not one of them.”

Such “stealth” modified AAHs were visually indistinguishable from standard models and boasted exceptional performance, sparking rumors that buying one over the counter could lead to a lucky find. A select few of those AAHs were so high-spec that they would normally have to be purchased

with coron. Some hunters, seduced by those reports, bought rifles in bulk, hoping to hit the jackpot. Such customers brought a brief surge of income to shopkeepers they mistook for AAH lovers, but an unlucky store could end up with its finances crushed under unsold inventory. Shizuka had had a few customers of that persuasion, but she didn't place orders until she received payment in full. The sight of hunters picking up AAHs by the truckload had struck her as a bit off-putting.

"Shizuka, what's that, er, 'coron' thing? Is it like aurum?" Akira asked. He had been listening attentively, and the unfamiliar term stood out to him.

His ignorance surprised Shizuka. She looked at him with pity for just a moment, then quickly resumed her usual smile and said, "You don't know what coron is, Akira?"

"No. I've never heard of it before."

"Well, it's kind of a long story. Do you mind?"

"No, please tell me."

Shizuka explained that there were two forms of money in the East: corporate currency and coron. Corporate currency came in five varieties, each issued by one of the Big Five, the ruling corporations of the ELGC. Aurum, backed by Sakashita Heavy Industries, was a prime example. Counterfeiting any of these currencies was a declaration of war against the ELGC, which had annihilated many a criminal organization for trying.

Coron was a separate form of payment used throughout the East: a digital currency, also known as Old World money, impossible to counterfeit with current technology. Like any other relic, it could be excavated in ruins, as a balance in a digital wallet called a coron card. Or one could acquire it through transactions with Old World entities.

Coron was the absolute standard of value in the East. Through the ELGC, it could be exchanged for any corporate currency at a generous rate, although steep fees discouraged changing corporate currency for coron. And transactions between major corporations were usually paid in coron, enhancing its value even further.

Most importantly, coron still worked as Old World currency. Some factories and other facilities in the ruins were as yet fully functional, protected by powerful robotic guards. Advanced Old World security systems were always a force to be reckoned with, and in some cases, not even top-notch hunters or the corporations' private armies stood a chance.

Fighting through those defenses to steal relics was next to impossible. But with coron, one could bargain with the factories' AI overseers, securing the opportunity to safely purchase the scarce and valuable goods they manufactured.

Therein lay the true value of coron: to buy Old World goods—and to negotiate with Old World entities. And although that information had once been a closely guarded secret, it was now common knowledge across the East.

Vending machines in the ruins sometimes sold medicines that could quickly regrow lost limbs or even reverse aging. Attempts to take their wares by force resulted in piles of corpses—casualties of Old World security—or even destroyed the vending machines and their precious contents. Coron was a shortcut to such priceless relics.

Rumor even said some corporations used coron to purchase military supplies from ancient production bases, threatening to disrupt the East's balance of power. So the ELGC searched ever more urgently for Old World currency. In order to encourage hunters to gather it from the ruins, and to funnel it into their own pockets, they offered a selection of products that could only be purchased with coron. Naturally, this exclusive line consisted of the best of the best.

"And there you have it," Shizuka finished. "Rumor has it that some AAHs have been modded to coron-exclusive specs. If it's true, I'd love to get a look at one."

"Thank you for explaining all that," Akira said, bowing to her. Now that he knew corporate currency could never buy him certain gear, he understood why Alpha insisted that any amount of aurum was pocket change. "It was really intriguing."

"Is that so? I'm glad."

Shizuka would have expected anyone who used a powered suit to know what she had just told him. It was common knowledge. The average Eastern adult knew, even if they had nothing to do with hunting. But not Akira. She felt a pang as she imagined his plight, but out of consideration for his feelings, she kept it hidden behind her usual smile.

Chapter 29: Shijima's Appraisal

Akira walked into his hotel and immediately switched to a room with a bath. Once he set his belongings down in the more spacious accommodation, he set his face in a firm expression and said, "Alpha, just to be clear, this is a day off, right? Scratch that. This *is* a day off. I'm going to rest."

Don't worry, Alpha replied, laughing. *I won't stop you.*

"Great. Time for a bath, then." Akira set off jauntily toward the bathroom, but a word from Alpha gave him pause.

If you really want to relax in the tub, you ought to take care of business first.

"Business? Am I forgetting something?" Akira looked mystified.

Alpha reminded him he hadn't told Sheryl how long he planned to leave his motorcycle with her. She might still be waiting, expecting him to come for it at any moment, so he had better stop by to give her an update. He hadn't paid the balance of his settlement with Shijima yet either, and a delay there could spell an end to their agreement. Ignoring either issue could lead to trouble, so Alpha recommended he wrap them up quickly.

"Do I really need to do that right now?" Akira grumbled. His heart was already set on a bath.

I won't force you, Alpha replied. *But don't blame me if this causes problems down the road.* Her carefree smile only exacerbated Akira's fears. Grudgingly, he set off to take care of business first.

Akira staggered slightly as he trudged through the slums. He was carrying two AAH assault rifles, a CWH anti-materiel rifle, and a backpack stuffed with more ammunition than usual. His suit-enhanced strength allowed him to shoulder the weight of his gear with ease, but it also made the suit that much harder to handle. Alpha's support could have made short work of that problem, of course, but doing things himself was part of his training. So at the moment, even walking normally was a challenge.

I'm having trouble putting one foot in front of the other, he complained. *Couldn't I have at least left the CWH behind?*

No, Alpha replied. *You'll be doing a lot more training with that rifle from now on, so get used to it. You don't want to get stuck fighting robots with just your AAH again, do you?*

Good point. Akira grimaced, remembering the hard-fought battle. *I bought it, so I'd better get used to it.*

As he continued plodding, he didn't stand out much for a hunter—just another greenhorn getting jerked around by his new gear. Yet most slum dwellers made way for him. For the average person, picking a fight with a man in a powered suit toting big anti-monster weapons was nothing short of suicide. Without realizing it, the boy who had spent his life dodging assaults in the back alleys had become a threat to be avoided.

◆

When Akira reached Sheryl's base, she cheerfully ushered him into her room and shut the door. Once they were alone and he had set down his burdens, she hugged him head-on. Akira sighed—he had vaguely expected this.

"Come on, get off me," he grumbled.

"What's the problem?" Sheryl responded. "This is two visits' worth, since you left so quickly last night."

"I don't know what you're talking about, but save it for later. I'm here on business."

"All right. After your business is done, then?" Sheryl backed away from Akira, stared him in the eyes, and smiled as if to say they'd now made a promise.

Akira finally realized that their last encounter in his hotel room had transformed her into a new kind of nuisance, and that the change was likely permanent. Once they were seated on either side of a table, he started over by casually pulling five hundred thousand aurum from his backpack and setting it between them.

"Pay this to Shijima," he said. "It's the rest of what we owe him for that peace deal."

Sheryl looked shaken. To slum kids like her and her gang, the

significance and power of that much money was shocking. Was Akira pushing himself too hard to avoid a fight with Shijima?

"Um, are you all right?" she asked, concerned. "He hasn't hassled us for the money since then, so I think we can afford to take a little more time."

"Don't worry. I made decent money on a job yesterday. Compared to that payout, this is pocket change," Akira replied with alacrity, experiencing a strange sensation as he did so.

From Alpha's perspective, his entire twelve-million-aurum reward was pocket change, and this half million was an even more trivial sum. Even by Akira's standards, the bills on the table were no longer a lot of money. He realized that the Akira who had lost his cool over two hundred thousand aurum was no more. Was that growth—or numbness? A change for better or for worse? He wasn't sure.

"I understand," Sheryl said, nodding and smiling despite her surprise. "I'll handle the payment to Shijima."

"Oh, and about my motorbike," Akira added. "My hotel hasn't got parking, and I can't leave it on the street, so I'd basically like to use your place as a garage for a while. Do you mind?"

"Park it here for as long as you want. We'll take care of it for days or years if need be. And if people see you popping in and out of this base, they'll think twice about trying anything on us."

"Great. Sorry for the hassle."

Behind her friendly, casual demeanor, Sheryl's mind was rapidly speculating. Akira had been living out of a cheap hotel room the last time she'd visited him, but now he spoke like half a million aurum meant nothing to him. And despite the radical shift in his economic circumstances, he had left his motorcycle with her rather than move to a hotel with a garage. She attached far too much significance to all these details.

"That's all I came for," Akira said. "Do you need me for anything else?"

At that question, Sheryl set all her guesses aside. "Nothing. Does that mean your business is done?" She smiled bewitchingly, moved her seat next to Akira's before he could make up his mind how to react, and snuggled against him in a hug. Then a cloud passed over her blissful expression.

"Your clothes are awfully hard," she grumbled.

"It's a powered suit," Akira said. "Of course it's harder than normal clothes."

“It’s *too* hard. Won’t you take it off?”

“No.”

“Oh, come on,” Sheryl wheedled. “It won’t cost you anything.”

“Yeah, it will,” Akira countered. “Taking off my suit will cost me a lot of strength.”

“But I’ll hug you for longer if you leave it on.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s less satisfying this way.”

Akira frowned, looking both annoyed and at a loss. Sheryl stared at him, delighted. Their odd conversation hovered somewhere between joking and genuine. A brief staring contest followed Sheryl’s last words, and Akira was the first to back down.

He sighed as he peeled his suit off his upper body, and she embraced him with more exuberance than ever. Her expression—a lopsided blend of relief, joy, bliss, and pleasure—did a lot to spoil her exceptional beauty. Strange, muffled moans occasionally escaped her lips. Sheryl felt as if something within her was being filled.

Akira bore her hug in silence—she wasn’t doing him any harm, and he figured she would let him go eventually if he indulged her. He scowled, however, when he noticed Alpha watching him with a mocking, knowing grin.

What? he demanded.

Nothing, she replied. *She seems awfully attached to you, although I haven’t the foggiest idea why. Are you into that sort of thing after all?*

Why is that your takeaway? Akira sighed.

“Sheryl,” he said, “would you give it a rest already? I’m still worn out from yesterday, and I’m looking forward to a nice, relaxing soak in the tub.”

“If it’s a bath you want, we have one here,” she responded. “Care to try it?”

“Huh? This place has a bathtub?”

“Yes, and quite a large one. I think you’d enjoy a soak in it.”

“I’m surprised it works, considering this building looks abandoned. I figured they would’ve shut off your hot water, even if you’ve got the tub and pipes. How do you pay for it?”

“I can’t vouch for how true this is, but someone told me that water is the

only utility the city keeps running in the slums," Sheryl explained. "Something about how they don't want us to riot for it or let things get so dirty that we spread diseases to the lower district. Didn't you know?"

"I know that—I used to wipe myself clean—but I didn't realize they give us hot water too," Akira said. Then something clicked for him. "Oh, I guess that's why you can make coffee."

Water bills for most residences in the slums went unpaid, since no records showed who owned or lived in them, but the city still supplied the district with water in its effort to keep the area under control. Tracking the slum dwellers' water usage also helped estimate their numbers and level of activity. And the authorities could always throttle or stop the water supply to limit the spread of the slums or to quietly cull its population. So precious virtue and cold, calculating profit kept the free water flowing at the city's convenience.

"A lot of people like this base because not many buildings can draw enough hot water to fill a bath," Sheryl said. "Syberg's gang used brute force to take it over, and we just inherited it from them. Without your support, we'd get chased out in no time. So stop by to use the tub anytime you like. I can get it ready for you right now. What do you say?"

"Nah, don't worry about it. I'll go back and use the one in my hotel room," Akira replied.

"Even if I got in with you to wash your back and help scrub you *all* over?" Sheryl smiled seductively, but Akira's answer didn't change.

"I paid for a room with a bath, so I'm gonna use it," he said. "Anyway, I wanna rest easy."

"I see. That's too bad." Sheryl would've bathed with Akira if he had let her, but she quietly dropped the subject as soon as she picked up on the hint of alarm that had entered his attitude. His refusal was a simple question of trust—he couldn't wear his suit or carry his rifles into the bathroom. He had only agreed to remove his suit around her, even partially, because she was too weak to pose any real threat to him.

Akira didn't trust her. Sheryl wasn't surprised, but she felt a twinge of sadness and clung to him even harder.

Someone knocked on the door.

"What is it?" Sheryl asked, letting a hint of her annoyance show.

Erio—the knocker—winced slightly at her tone but answered, "Boss,

Shijima and his guys are here. They say they wanna talk."

"Oh. I'll be right there."

If Sheryl wanted to win Akira's trust, she would need to do her job as the leader of her gang, she decided. So, reluctantly, she drew away from him.

◆

The two groups faced each other in a space that was too shabby to call a reception room but at least contained a table and chairs. Akira, Sheryl, and Shijima were seated. Shijima's armed guards were positioned behind their boss, relaxed but alert. Erio and Aricia stood behind Sheryl, looking tense.

A child nervously set coffee on the table, then hurried out of the room. Erio and Aricia watched enviously.

"I'm sorry that we can't offer you more refreshments," Sheryl said, smiling across the table at Shijima. "We're operating on a tight budget."

"Don't mention it," Shijima responded.

"Now, what brings you here?"

"Oh, just a courtesy call. We never got a chance to really talk."

"I follow you. Akira is alive and well."

"I'm glad to see it."

Perceiving that they understood each other, the two gang captains smiled, Sheryl serenely and Shijima with dignity.

Akira was still in the dark. *Alpha, what are they talking about?* he asked, looking puzzled.

About Shijima checking up on you, I assume. Seeing that he still didn't get it, Alpha elaborated further: Many hunters had died in the recent assault, and Shijima wouldn't have been surprised if Akira had been one of them. The gang leader had called on Sheryl to gauge her reactions face-to-face. If Akira were dead, she would probably be reeling from the loss of her patron.

Sheryl had intuited Shijima's intention and confirmed that Akira was safe. And Shijima, sensing that she knew the reason for his visit, had calmly accepted her report.

Akira finally grasped the situation. *Nothing gets by them, huh? What a pain*.

Every leader has to be able to read between the lines, Alpha responded.

Sheryl placed the five hundred thousand aurum Akira had just given her on the table. “Here’s the rest of what we owe you.”

“Indeed it is,” Shijima said. “This marks a peaceful end to that mess. I’d like to keep things friendly between us going forward.”

“So would I.”

Shijima inspected Akira while he conversed. Most struggling hunters couldn’t afford to outfit themselves with powered suits, but Akira wore one. He even carried a rifle too bulky to use without it. Shijima mentally estimated the cost of Akira’s equipment and grew even warier of the hunter who had earned it.

I figured he was no ordinary kid, but I didn’t count on him gearing up so fast, he reflected. *Should I pat myself on the back for not crossing him last time, or blame myself for not killing him before he filled out his arsenal? Well, I guess there’s no sense crying over spilled milk.*

The gang leader turned his attention to Sheryl. Her serene smile radiated such confidence that he hardly recognized her. The scared, nervous girl who had shivered during her visit to his base was nowhere to be seen. She had even kept her cool when she handed over the five hundred thousand aurum, although a mere glimpse of that much money would rattle almost any slum dweller. The same went for her attitude toward his armed subordinates. Shijima expected the uneasy looks on Erio and Aricia’s faces, but Sheryl’s smile remained unperturbed.

Why is she so self-assured? Because she found out just how tough her patron is? I’ll admit that I’ve got to think twice about messing with her now, but that doesn’t explain how calm she was with the money. The pair behind her are scared of us and of that much cash, so where does her confidence come from? No one gets that kind of grit overnight. What happened to her?

Shijima considered his next move. Privately, he added his fresh insights into Akira and Sheryl to what he already knew of their gang’s size, strength, and territory. When he finished his mental calculations, he gave Sheryl a smile that he never revealed to inferiors—a sign that he would need to negotiate with her in earnest.

“Then I’d like to discuss the future,” he said. “Can you spare the time for a long talk? Both of our organizations will benefit. But I’m the one who barged in here without an appointment. I’ll reschedule if I caught you at a bad moment.”

Sheryl noticed the change in Shijima's attitude. He no longer took her lightly. If he decided to crush her in the future, she realized, he wouldn't hold back. Yet her smile never wavered.

"Now is fine," she said. "Let's get down to business."

"All right, then," Shijima began. "About the turf issue that set off that squabble—"

"Er, excuse me," Akira interjected. "Do I have to stick around for this? It sounds like you'll be talking for a while, and I wanna head home."

The others stared at him in surprise, but Sheryl didn't bat an eye.

"I'm glad you asked," she said pleasantly. "I'd hate to tie you down for who knows how long while we chat. Don't mind me; you're free to go."

"Our gangs may differ in size, but this is a talk between bosses," Shijima added earnestly. "I'd actually prefer that any outsiders leave us to it."

Erio and Aricia shot imploring gazes at Akira, begging him not to leave. But they were facing his back, and their pleas went unanswered.

"Great. Then I'll see you later," Akira said. "Sheryl, let me know if you need anything."

"Thank you for your trouble. Drop by anytime." Sheryl watched him go with a smile, but her lieutenants paled as soon as their protector left the room. She noticed their tension, although she never turned to look at them. "Relax. We won't have any problems with them, even without Akira here. These aren't fools like the last batch."

"We don't want unnecessary trouble," Shijima said, partly to remind his men. "You paid us a million aurum for peace. We won't start anything even if this negotiation falls through."

At that, Erio and Aricia relaxed—but only slightly. They were still desperate for the meeting to end. Yet their wishes went unheard, and the two leaders spoke together for quite some time.

After wrapping up his talk with Sheryl, Shijima returned to his own headquarters and went to his private room to collect his thoughts. Ultimately, Sheryl had relinquished half of her territory—the areas that her gang couldn't keep under control. In exchange, she had gotten one million aurum and a promise to establish a level of cooperation between their groups.

Not a bad deal. I even wrangled some turf out of it. But still... Shijima's

face clouded with a worry he couldn't put his finger on. *Sheryl's transformation bothers me even more than Akira does. Where does all her cool confidence come from? Is she just full of herself because she's got Akira eating out of her hand? No, there's gotta be more to it.*

Shijima couldn't shake the feeling that he'd woken something better left asleep.

◆

Akira was in his hotel room, soaking up to his neck in bathwater. His face relaxed as he savored the pleasure of bathing and felt his fatigue melting away. It was only a matter of time before the tub consumed his mind and even simple conversation became impossible. Alpha spoke up before he reached that point.

Akira, I know you're in the middle of recuperating, but would you mind talking about what comes next?

He turned his vacant gaze toward her. As before, she seemed to be in the bath with him, her beautiful skin gently flushed as if from the heat of the water. Her perfectly proportioned figure wavered slightly, distorted through the lens of the slowly rippling water, as its details appeared and disappeared behind motes of reflected light. Droplets of bathwater and sweat funneled between her ample breasts.

She had squandered innumerable sophisticated calculations to create this alluring vision of feminine beauty.

But Akira's reaction was decidedly muted. Bathing diluted his interest in her charms even more than everyday exposure already had. All he wanted right now was to avoid any annoying remarks she might make.

"You mean our hunting plans from tomorrow onward?" he asked.

That's correct, Alpha replied. *Especially your frame of mind for them.*

"Not sure I follow. I'm gonna keep working cautiously and carefully, like I have been. Is there more to it?"

There is, Alpha said gravely. *You'll need to be even more cautious from now on. Assume that every wound is fatal. You've gone through almost all the medicine we picked up in the ruins. You don't have enough left to keep bulldozing your way through trouble, so watch out. I mean it.*

Her tone alarmed Akira, but he still asked, "Can't we buy more medicine

from Shizuka?"

Hers won't hold a candle to what you've been using. Remember when you broke your leg? The capsules you're used to got you back into fighting shape in five minutes. The cheap pills you bought yesterday would take two weeks for a complete recovery.

Akira grimaced. "That *is* a big difference. Couldn't we just buy something closer to the old stuff?"

Not easily. Even if you found it for sale somewhere, it would set you back at least a million aurum per box.

"I've been gulping down handfuls of something worth that much?!" Akira shouted, spluttering in surprise.

It kept you alive, but yes, it's pricey.

Only then did Akira realize how dire his situation was. Any careless injuries he suffered from now on would affect more than just one battle—they could fatally alter the rest of his life. As excellent as it was, his powered suit could only do so much to compensate for broken bones—relying on it might even worsen his wounds until he bled to death.

"Wait, can't we go back to the ruins for more pills?" he asked. "I bet there are still some lying around if we look." His face brightened at the thought of a solution, but quickly fell again when Alpha shook her head.

That massive attack significantly altered the monster population of the Kuzusuhara Town Ruins. Things that would normally lurk deeper inside might be wandering the outskirts. You probably wouldn't survive a trip there now, even with my support.

"No dice, huh? Okay, I'll be as careful as I can."

Please try. I'll do my best to help.

Akira tried to summon his resolve but failed, overcome by the pleasures of the bathtub. A languid moan escaped his mouth. His gaze met Alpha's.

"I can't help it, okay?" he said.

Well, you'll be the one to suffer if you get careless, she responded. *Watch out, unless you want to find out what it's like to have your suit walk you home on two broken legs.*

"I will—just thinking about that hurts." This time, Akira succeeded in steeling himself.

And after all that commotion in Kuzusuhara Town, I plan to avoid any relic-hunting trips to its inner recesses for a while. That means you'll be

visiting other ruins from now on. Be prepared.

Other ruins, huh? Akira mused. *Well, I've got a motorbike now. Even if they're a bit of a trip, at least I won't have to run there.*

Running might be a good idea, Alpha suggested with a sly grin. *It would double as powered-suit practice and help you build stamina.*

No way in hell!

Alpha broke into a cheerful laugh at Akira's look of revulsion.

Chapter 30: To Each Their Own

Druncam, one of the hunter syndicates, had a base on the outskirts of Kugamayama's lower district. Rows of large warehouses and buildings filled its expansive grounds, housing an array of facilities up to and including an indoor firing range. An on-site Hunter Office branch made the group's influence plain for all to see.

Katsuya was at the firing range, working on his marksmanship. The grim set of his features revealed his frustration with his own inadequacy. He was mentally and physically exhausted from ceaseless practice. So now, instead of improving his accuracy, his only "gain" was the pain from his weapon's recoil. There was no sense in continuing, and he knew it. But every bullet that missed its target seemed to proclaim his deficiency. So he stubbornly persisted, trying in vain to shake off that feeling.

Yumina and Airi watched him with concern, until the sight of him doggedly plugging away at targets he could no longer hit became too much for them.

"Katsuya, I think it's time you took a break," Yumina spoke up.

"You need rest," Airi added. "Training won't do you any good when you're this tired."

Katsuya still showed no sign of stopping. When Yumina saw this, she walked up to him, put a hand on his rifle, looked him in the eye, and shook her head. At last, he lowered his weapon.

"I couldn't save them," he groaned dejectedly. "If only I'd been stronger!"

Seeing Katsuya like this pained them even more than memories of their recent battle.

"It wasn't your fault," Yumina said.

"You did the best you could," Airi chimed in. "We were all prepared for the worst, just like you were. You aren't to blame."

Druncam had committed many hunters to repelling the assault. Veterans like Shikarabe were required to join in, unless they were injured or too far

away at the time. Not that most of them had needed much encouragement—they saw the battle as a chance to score big. Shikarabe had been in high spirits while he geared up and then sortied with his colleagues.

Young hunters like Katsuya's team had gotten a choice. Druncam hadn't been eager to send its rookies into a conflict big enough to draw out the defense forces. But the city had welcomed any help it could get, and the emergency listings had been in the ELGC's name. The syndicate couldn't order its less experienced members to stay clear—at least not openly. So for appearances' sake, it had made their participation voluntary. Even so, many of the young hunters had put their names forward. They thought being left out meant they were being looked down on, and didn't want to pass up a golden opportunity to prove their ability.

Katsuya had been the first to volunteer, seemingly obsessed with the idea of rescuing someone. Many other boys and girls had followed him onto the battlefield. Katsuya's team of ten had been stationed far from the thick of the fighting, which took place between the city's troops and the largest enemy horde. Away from the main contest, the novices had struggled against a loose-knit swarm of monsters.

There they learned just how capable they really were, and the seven survivors—Katsuya among them—had returned with pay and glory worthy of their conduct. But the remaining three had died, swallowed by the wasteland. All had been Katsuya's friends: together they had overcome harsh training and shared dreams of making it big as hunters. The battle was so ferocious, however, that even retrieving their bodies was impossible.

Katsuya's guilty conscience drove him now. If only he had been stronger, he thought, he might have been able to save his comrades.

Yumina gently embraced him from behind. "We'll get stronger," she said. "We'll protect everyone next time. I'll help. So rest now, okay?"

"I'll support you," added Airi. She spoke little, but her determination was clear.

That revived Katsuya enough for him to at least put on a brave face. Gratefully, he forced a smile and said, "I guess you're right. Sorry I worried you."

"Don't mention it," Yumina responded. "We're a team, remember?"

"We'll keep doing our best together," said Airi.

They took Katsuya by the hands and led him out of the firing range. He

didn’t resist.

As he reflected on how much his friends meant to him, he suddenly thought of Akira, the boy who had set off into the desert alone. What had become of him? Unlike Akira, the young Druncam hunters had returned to Kugamayama to prepare for the onslaught, and even so they had suffered losses. Katsuya could picture where running off half-cocked would have gotten them—how he would have ended up if Yumina and Airi hadn’t stopped him.

“There’s no way *he* could’ve made it,” he murmured.

“Katsuya?” Yumina asked. “Did you say something?”

“No, nothing.” He flashed a grin and tried to put the thought out of his mind. He’d never found out if Akira was skilled or just lucky, but there was no point wondering about the dead. His teammates smiled back, reassured that he would be all right.

◆

“What did you call me in to talk about?” Shikarabe asked Arabe—his friend and a Druncam executive. “If it’s about that argument, my work on the front lines ought to make up for it. I’m not in the mood for another lecture.”

The city defense forces that had engaged the worst of the swarm were a true private army, made up of tanks, mechs, heavily armed cyborgs, and augmented and armored infantry. Nothing less could have stopped the rampaging monsters. And Shikarabe’s unit had been stationed near the thickest fighting. He’d welcomed the posting, since it gave him a shot at huge earnings—but the reason for it galled him. After the dust had settled, he’d learned that his assignment had been a punishment for that squabble on the patrol truck.

Shikarabe accepted some of the blame, since the fight had broken out on his watch. But the fighting he’d done, so close to the main clash that a stray blast might have ended him, had more than made up for any damage to Druncam’s reputation. He wasn’t about to take another round of complaints lying down.

“Don’t blame me—I didn’t make that call.” Arabe grinned awkwardly, his tone placating. “So what if the syndicate cares more about fostering

young talent? It happens. This isn't exactly an apology, but I worked things out so you won't have to babysit those kids anymore. So cheer up and hang in there a little longer."

"Fine," Shikarabe said gruffly. "Sorry I snapped at you."

"Don't sweat it. I hate taking care of kids too."

Being able to converse frankly with his friend put Shikarabe in a better mood. "So, if you didn't call me here to chew me out, what do you need me for?"

"Oh, I just want to ask you a few questions about Katsuya and his team while I pick out their next babysitter. I hear they ended up with an assignment too tough for most rookies and did pretty well at it. Three out of ten dead with no caretaker isn't bad when you consider what they got done. Wouldn't you say they're more than just big-mouthed punks now that they've got a real brush with death under their belts?"

"I wouldn't be so quick to call 'em full-fledged hunters when they needed to sacrifice three people to make it back alive." Shikarabe scowled. "Knowing Katsuya, he's beating himself up about not being strong enough. What an idiot. If he were ten times stronger, he'd just go someplace ten times more dangerous and get more of his buddies killed. He doesn't know his limits, and he refuses to learn them."

"You don't think he's cut out for hunting, then?"

Shikarabe considered the question. When he answered, he looked serious. "He's a diamond in the rough—more talented than you or me. He might even be one in a million. I'm sure he'll shine with the right training and a few more life-or-death battles behind him."

"That's high praise," Arabe said, surprised. "I thought you couldn't stand him."

"I'm not incompetent enough to let personal feelings cloud my judgment. You see his potential too, or you wouldn't give him special treatment. Am I wrong?"

"You've got me there. I wouldn't have made you babysit him otherwise. I was hoping you'd train him up, but I guess you were a poor match. Couldn't you have shown a little more restraint? It wouldn't hurt to get in his good books now."

"No thanks." Shikarabe grimaced. "Besides, that only matters if he actually makes it big. I called him a diamond in the rough, but I've got

better things to do than polish him. His glorious future won't be built on my back." He saw Katsuya's potential and thought that a skilled mentor could help the boy realize it—but he had no plans to fill those shoes. "He already got three people killed. You think they would've gone anywhere near the front if he hadn't been so quick to volunteer?" Shikarabe glossed over the fact that participation had been an individual choice. He was working himself back into a foul mood. "Seeing a few friends die will help those kids shape up and grow, but it won't help the dead any. I don't wanna be part of their body count."

Arabe looked at his friend and sighed. "I'd have an easier time finding your replacement if you didn't gripe so much."

"I'll bet. I don't want to play babysitter, and neither does anyone else."

Arabe had hoped that, after a talk and some time to calm down, he could convince Shikarabe to mentor Katsuya's team again. But his friend's hatred of Katsuya turned out to run deeper than he'd imagined, so he scrapped that plan and changed tack.

"Can you think of anyone who might be willing to take them on?" he asked, confident that Shikarabe wouldn't deliberately recommend a bad fit for the job, at least. The veteran hunter had promised not to let personal feelings cloud his judgment, and sure enough, he gave the matter serious thought.

"What about Elena and Sara?" he finally suggested. "The kids seem to like those two, and Druncam was trying to scout them, last I heard."

"We're in talks with them, but I wouldn't get your hopes up."

"Hire them to train the kids, then. We've sent them out together before."

"There's a big difference between getting them to work with the kids and formal training, especially in terms of pay. Hiring outsiders is a lot tougher than you make it sound." Arabe frowned.

"You executives are supposed to sort out that stuff." Shikarabe flashed a grin at his friend, who had given up hunting for managerial desk work. "Good luck."

"I know that. But tell me, are those two up to the task?"

"I don't know how good they are as teachers, but as hunters, they're almost too good for those brats. I caught a glimpse of 'em taking down camouflaged monsters during the big attack, and I doubt we've got many people on their level. Rumor has it they went through a rough patch, but I

guess they got over it."

"Very well. I'll try upping their fee and see where that gets us. Accounting won't complain if I spin it as a step toward recruitment."

"Accounting, huh?" Shikarabe pulled a face. "I wish they'd get a clue about what it's like for us on the ground."

"Well, we'd have trouble getting by without them." Arabe grinned wryly. "Consider it a cost of our group getting too big."

"I just wish that cost didn't fall on me."

"You could always come join me and work on keeping it under control."

Arabe flashed a taunting smile, and Shikarabe laughed it off.

"Sorry, but office work's not my style."

"So you dump it all on me?"

The friends kept on cheerfully griping about their organization for some time.

◆

Elena and Sara were looking tired when they turned up at Cartridge Freak to resupply.

"Shizuka, give us our usual stuff, but triple the normal amount," Elena said, seeming even wearier than her partner.

"That's a big order," the shopkeeper replied. "And you look exhausted. Was it really that bad?" Her gaze shifted from Elena's face to Sara's chest, where the latter's fatigue was most apparent. Before the attack, Sara's breasts had been too large to squeeze into her body armor, but they had shrunk considerably since. "That looks like a 'yes.'"

Sara was the team's muscle, and her weapons were weighty and cumbersome, with recoil that matched their impressive firepower. Using them too much too quickly increased the drain on her nanomachines. If Sara exhausted the reserves stored in her chest, she would die. Elena took this into consideration when issuing orders, but Sara's stock had still visibly decreased. Shizuka could see that the pair had been through an intense battle.

"I wish you wouldn't conclude that from my boobs," Sara said, smiling awkwardly. "Well, at least our pay was nothing to sneeze at. Maybe they're being generous to any hunters who made it back alive to stop us from

making a fuss."

"I'd *love* to air my grievances," Elena grumbled. "Some of those monsters had camouflage. I got stuck with the job of finding them all—with no warning—which brought us near the center of the fighting. It was a nightmare."

Shizuka smiled with good-natured mockery. "If you got paid enough to keep quiet about that, I'd appreciate your help keeping my store in business. Let's see: Elena, I think you could use..." She ran her eyes over Elena's gear, racking her brains for a recommendation, when a puzzled look came over her face. "Come to think of it, you don't wear a powered suit. Why don't you buy one? Akira did, and he only just started hunting."

"A powered suit? For me? Hmm..." Elena gave the idea some consideration. Then she grinned sheepishly and said, "I figured I could scrape by without one for a while longer, but you're right. It might be time."

Most Easterners had the potential to become excellent athletes. Training would take anyone to considerable heights, although some peaked higher than others. Exceptional individuals who only had physical conditioning sometimes performed as well as those with augmentation or a powered suit. Some of these "superhumans" even destroyed tanks with their bare hands. The causes of such abilities remained shrouded in mystery, although theories abounded: atavistic descendants of genetically augmented Old Worlders, results of Old World medicine, mutations that duplicated the effects of extremely advanced augmentation, and so on.

Elena was naturally strong enough to lug her heavy scanners around without help, but she was no superhuman. Her athletic ability paled beside Sara's, which was on par with a powered suit.

There was no way to measure the limits of a person's physical potential. Aspiring superhumans could only believe in themselves and keep training. Some claimed that if you started wearing a powered suit, you stopped pushing—and thus improving—your body. Between these ideas and financial difficulties, Elena had been reluctant to buy a suit. But her latest payday made cost irrelevant. More significantly, it had just about solved the problem of Sara's nanomachine supply. So, Elena thought, it might be time to give up on strengthening her body and instead add a powered suit to her arsenal.

"Perhaps the time for it has come," she said, chuckling as she gave in.

“Shizuka, would you pick out a good one for me?”

“No,” Shizuka replied. Powered suits fell outside both her business expertise and technical know-how. “Go consult a specialist and buy one yourself. I know you two earn enough to afford it.”

“Oh, come on. I heard you chose Akira’s for him, so you must have business contacts. I’d like to buy all my gear in one place.” Her expression soured slightly as she added, “Anyway, something about the way they measure people in those suit shops gives me the creeps. It feels like they’re trying to map my body down to the cellular level.”

“If you ask me, that level of precision is *why* you should see a specialist.”

“It makes sense for one of those suits that temporarily fuses to your body, but I’m not in the market for anything that exotic,” Elena persisted. “Those’re pricey, for one thing. So I’d rather have you measure me.”

“Then pick out a suit yourself, and I’ll order it for you,” Shizuka offered as a compromise. “Don’t you gather and analyze data for a living?”

“It’ll be luckier if you choose for me. Your picks haven’t let me down yet. You helped Akira out, and we’ve been regulars way longer than he has. So what’s the big deal? Throw us a bone.”

“You leave me no choice.” Shizuka grinned ruefully. Then her expression turned bold as she joked, “But brace yourself, because I’ll make you buy the most expensive suit I can find.”

While Elena listed the specs she wanted her new suit to have, a thought crossed Shizuka’s mind. “Speaking of powered suits,” she asked, “does simply putting one on really make you that much more capable?”

“No way,” Sara answered. “It’s just another piece of equipment; you need to train with it. The sudden boost in strength can even jerk you around and make it harder to get things done.” She was effectively wearing a powered suit at all times, so she knew all about the troubles they could cause. “Well, an Old World suit might give you a boost even without training. I’ve got nanomachine augmentations, but I still had to put in hard work to get the most out of them.”

“Of course,” Shizuka said thoughtfully.

The shopkeeper knew Akira had to have earned the money for his recent purchases during the monster incursion the other day. But that didn’t add up. He’d fought using a suit he’d had no time to master and an assault rifle

ineffective against machines—nowhere near enough to survive a battle that paid ten million aurum. Shizuka had hoped that her friends' answer would relieve her doubts, but no such luck. But looking at Sara reminded her of the conversation they had once had about Akira, and that suggested a way to make the pieces fit into place.

Akira is probably an Old Domain User, she reflected, *but that has nothing to do with Old World gear. Besides, I picked out his suit myself—it's no relic. Wait—he did make a lot of specific requests. Are those features especially helpful to Users?* At that point, she felt her speculating would yield no more answers. *I can't exactly ask him, so I might as well forget about it.* Asking unnecessary questions was a bad habit, and it could ruin her relationship with Akira.

"Sorry to change the subject," Elena interjected, "but what do you think of that attack, Shizuka?"

"I only know what I saw on the news, so I'm not sure what to tell you," Shizuka replied. "Was anything odd about the reports?"

The shop's large, wall-mounted display was usually set to broadcast news from the ELGC, the city authorities, or the Hunter Office for the benefit of hunters. At that very moment, a female ELGC press officer was relaying the details of the attack.

"The ELGC has identified the recent attempted assault on Kugamayama City by a monster swarm as an act of terrorism perpetrated by nationalists," the woman announced. "Multiple terrorist groups have already issued statements taking credit for the attack, which they describe as a punishment against the ELGC for treating them unfairly, and as a holy war against its unjust control of the East. The ELGC will swiftly implement punitive measures and crack down on terrorist organizations which disturb the peace of..."

Nationalists aspired to found nation-states in the East. Although a minority, their numbers were too great for the ELGC to ignore. Peaceful activists strove for autonomy within the League's corporate framework, while extremists went as far as occupying cities by force and declaring independence with the backing of the United Central Nations, or UCN for short. The more violent groups often warred openly with the ELGC, and the resulting devastation had reduced many cities to rubble and left the League with staggering losses.

“Nationalists, huh?” Sara mused. “That’s probably why the ELGC was our client, although I wish they’d done more if they knew what was coming. Not that I’ve got any complaints about the pay, of course.”

Jobs from the ELGC were handsomely rewarded, especially when nationalists were involved. Offering low pay would affect the League’s prestige. That was enough for Sara, but Elena remained unconvinced.

“I doubt this city has enough clout to make it a tempting target for terrorists,” she said. “The nationalists must have taken heavy losses if they baited monsters out of the heart of the Kuzusuhara Town Ruins, and that kind of stunt would bring repercussions on their comrades elsewhere. I don’t know how far to trust those reports. What do you think, Shizuka?”

“They aren’t lying, and their story makes sense,” the shopkeeper replied casually. “Still, parts of it don’t sit right with me. That’s basically my takeaway. But then, there isn’t much use in us worrying about it, is there?” Whatever was going on behind the scenes, Shizuka’s intuition told her that she and her friends were out of harm’s way, at least.

“I guess not,” Elena admitted, dismissing her doubts as well. “We got well paid, so ordinary hunters like us should keep our noses clean and focus on figuring out the best way to spend our earnings. So, Shizuka, can I count on you for that suit?”

“Absolutely. It’s too late for regrets. You asked me to choose your suit for you, so wear whatever I pick out without complaint.” Shizuka gave Elena a bold and menacing grin.

Her intuition was as keen as ever.

◆

An armed group was advancing deep into the Kuzusuhara Town Ruins. Their equipment was a cut above that of the hunters operating around Kugamayama, and their smooth, synchronized movements bespoke a high level of training. Under the command of a man named Yanagisawa, the force marched ever farther into the ruins.

“Chief Yanagisawa,” one subordinate said, “I realize it’s a bit late for questions, but is this really a good idea?”

“I told you, we’re in the clear,” Yanagisawa replied, laughing cheerfully. “I got tacit permission from the ELGC.”

“But we still sent monsters stampeding toward a city, and the news is blaming nationalists. We could get lumped in with those terrorists if we’re not careful.”

“The decoys who lured out the monsters and bit the dust *were* nationalists.” Yanagisawa grinned smugly. “From the Alfoto Party. So, the news isn’t wrong. The nationalists should be happy too—they died to achieve their goal.”

“Those guys were with the Alfoto Party? I wondered where you got them from. Does that mean you’ve even got pull with nationalists, Chief?”

“You might say that. Information is everything, and it doesn’t take much digging to find contacts.”

“Was siccing all those monsters on a city really a good move?” another man interjected. “I know the city fought ’em off, but what we did’s supposed to be a capital crime. I’ve got no clue what you’re planning, Chief, but I don’t wanna be anyone’s sacrifice.”

“Like I said, I got the okay on that too. The way I heard it, the bourgeoisie inside the walls were dragging their feet about defense costs because the city forces hadn’t had a chance to show off in a while.” Yanagisawa’s tone turned mocking. “They’re so safe and cozy that they forget they’re living in the East sometimes. This land is crawling with monsters, and security doesn’t come cheap. They need a good scare now and then to stop them from getting too cocky behind their walls.”

“But monsters out of any old ruin should’ve been good enough for that,” a third subordinate said. “Why go out of our way to lure out real heavy hitters from the heart of Kuzusuhara Town?”

“The outskirts have been fully explored for a while now,” Yanagisawa explained. “Kugamayama City’s management thinks it’s high time someone got back to charting the depths. Cutting down on the monster population deeper in suits them just fine.”

“So luring them away was part of the plan?”

“You got it. Out in the wasteland, the city can roll out the big guns and mow them down with tanks—cheaper than sending extermination teams in here. But who’d want to get stuck decoying the monsters out? That’s where I come in.”

“And that’s what you brought the Alfoto guys along for?” another man asked, shocked and a little disgusted.

“Pretty much. And lucky for me, they said they were willing to die for the cause. I’m not, so I left them to it. Of course, I can’t pretend that I told them the entire story, but we’ve always been enemies anyway. I was under no obligation to give them explanations they didn’t ask for.”

The men reacted in various ways—laughter, disgust, indifference—but none questioned Yanagisawa’s competence.

“Hunters must’ve suffered heavy losses in that fight too, Chief,” someone else chimed in. “Won’t they haunt you when they find out you planned the whole thing?” He had been scouted for his hunting ability, and sympathy for his former colleagues put a scowl on his face.

“Hunters must have made out like bandits off this mess,” Yanagisawa replied. “I bet a bunch of them really did get rich quick. Sure, some died too, but they knew the risks when they went out hunting. If we hadn’t done anything, the unskilled and unlucky would still have died some other way. Hunting is a deadly job, and I don’t have time to field complaints from everyone who found that out the hard way.”

“Well, that is one way to look at it,” the man admitted. He was still unhappy, but he dropped the subject.

Having answered his subordinates’ questions, Yanagisawa began singing his own praises. “The city administrators want to shut up the middle district. The defense forces are looking to show off and justify their budget. The Alfoto Party wants to attack a city and score some influence. The Kugamayama executives seek to conquer the Kuzusuhara Town Ruins. Hunters want fame and fortune. And with my plan, everyone but the monsters walks away happy. Amazing, no?”

“But what’s in it for you, Chief?” one of his subordinates asked quizzically. “What’d you set all this up for? And what do you want that’s so deep inside Kuzusuhara Town, now that a lot of the monsters are gone? You must be after more than just relics if you need to bring us along.”

“That’s a secret.” Yanagisawa grinned cunningly. “But I guess you could say I’m in it for the advancement of humanity. And don’t worry—you won’t lose out on this. Even ‘just’ relic hunting in here can turn a hefty profit. I couldn’t rent you that kind of gear otherwise. You realize those are the latest Front Line models you’re using, right?” He pointed smugly to the man’s gun. “I even got you that Ragnarok and the annihilation warheads to go with it. You’ve got to be careful, but the power it packs will blow your

mind. And jobs like this are the only chances you'll ever get to use one, so I hope you appreciate my enthusiasm."

This unit was always well equipped, but they had received even more impressive gear for their present assignment. Yanagisawa had seen to that.

Evidently in high spirits, he continued chatting with his subordinates. Once the group passed a certain point, however, he sobered and said, "No more chitchat. Let's go."

The unit marched on into the depths of the Kuzusuhara Town Ruins.

◆

A few days after the onslaught, Akira kitted himself out for the wasteland and left his hotel first thing in the morning. He was fully rested, thanks in part to his day off, but his brief vacation was over. Now better armed and more capable, he needed to resume hunting if he ever hoped to meet Alpha's demands.

So he suited up, strapped on an AAH, slung his CWH across his back, and set off into the slums. Besides his backpack crammed with ammo, he carried instruments he'd rented from the Office for his next hunt. He was bound for Sheryl's base, where his motorcycle awaited him.

On his way, he spotted slum dwellers lining up for food rations and halted, struck by a strange feeling of nostalgia. But he turned and moved on, as if shaking free of his past. Akira was no longer qualified to join that queue.

When he reached Sheryl's base, he told the young guard outside what he wanted. The boy nervously hurried into the building. After a brief wait, he returned with the bike and Sheryl. She had obviously been roused from sleep and done only the bare minimum to make herself presentable. Taking time for a thorough beauty routine would have meant keeping Akira waiting, and while she had wavered, the latter ultimately concerned her more.

Even so, she was far from unsightly. Her lightly disheveled appearance made her seem approachable, creating an impression of intimacy. The soaps and makeup she'd received from Katsuragi were slowly taking effect, their restorative components adding gloss to her skin and hair. The boy wheeling the motorcycle wore a look that said getting to see her up close was a perk

of his job, but Akira's reaction was as muted, as always.

"I'm just here for my motorbike," he said. "You should've stayed in bed if you're sleepy."

Sheryl smiled pleasantly and shook her head. "I couldn't possibly sleep in and miss your visit."

"Yeah? Well, suit yourself."

With that brief response, Akira began attaching the rented instruments to his motorcycle. It didn't take long. Then he straddled the bike and prepared to drive into the desert.

"I'll leave this with you again when my job's done," he said. "Sorry I woke you."

"Don't be, and stop by anytime you like. Good hunting." Sheryl smiled at Akira as he sped off and rode on out of the slums. Once he was out of sight, she regretfully murmured, "So, this look didn't work either. He's a tough nut to crack. I'll have to consider my next move."

She returned to her room, her mind full of plans to catch Akira's interest.

◆

The back alleys of the slums were rough, but they were nothing compared to the wasteland. Akira was driving himself—he needed the practice—and wobbled with a startled cry as soon as he hit the desert terrain.

He was still unused to his suit and carrying his heavy CWH, so that slight loss of balance quickly worsened, threatening to send him tumbling off his motorcycle. But Alpha stepped in at the last moment, taking control and swiftly righting the bike.

That was a close one, she said with a mocking laugh, lounging in the air beside him. *You still have a long way to go.*

I already know that, Akira replied with a strained grin. *I'm gonna keep working on that and a whole lot more, so I'm counting on you to have my back.*

Leave it to me. Now, hang on—I'm going to speed up to recover some stability.

Akira raced through the wasteland at ever greater speeds. His small arsenal, powered suit, and motorcycle were a dramatic upgrade over what

he'd had when he met Alpha. His skills were likewise improving by leaps and bounds. But it still wasn't nearly enough to complete Alpha's job—just his first step down a rocky road that stretched beyond the horizon.

He sought in the wastes the strength to reach the end of that road, just as many other hunters ventured out in search of wealth, power, and glory. But Akira had gained a partner in Alpha, and he walked a different path from the rest of his profession. Their checkered career, born the moment they made their contract, was still just in its infancy.

To be continued in Volume Two...

Side Story: Border City Girls

The trade city of Farageld stood on the border between the East and Central, linking the flow of goods between the two regions.

The Invisible Wall: that was what people called the no-man's-land around Farageld and the several other cities that dotted the frontier. There were no barricades to be seen on that expanse of barren ground—not because they were camouflaged, but because they simply weren't there. Not even a simple fence had been erected. Yet a wall it was, for both the United Central Nations and the Eastern League of Governing Corporations would attack without warning and utterly annihilate anyone and anything that tried to slip across the border.

So passage was unobstructed but impossible. By mutual agreement between the two governments, any trespassers in the restricted zone were fair game. Even the recovery of their corpses or wreckage was forbidden. Those who set foot there were met with excessive force and their often-unrecognizable bodies left to rot. The only way across the Invisible Wall was through border cities like Farageld.

In Farageld itself, massive bulwarks marked off three zones: the Central Quarter, which lay along the East-Central border proper; the semiautonomous Common Quarter, in the middle of the city; and the Eastern Quarter. The Common Quarter was a point of contact between the East and Central, a place where the cultures, economies, and technology of both regions intermingled.

In a waiting room of one of the Common Quarter's general hospitals, a fair-skinned girl sat, her pretty face grim and haggard. She worried first and foremost about the well-being of her best friend, currently undergoing treatment. The friend suffered from a disease that Central considered incurable. Now, nearing the end of her life, she was too ill to lift a finger of her own volition.

To save her friend, the pale girl had brought her here to the Common Quarter, where Eastern technology was available. Her friend had been

reluctant, but the girl had talked her around. Against the odds, the girl's zeal, effort, and desperation had paid off—she had just barely gotten her friend into a hospital.

She was still waiting—almost praying—when the treatment room doors opened and her dark-skinned best friend emerged with a slightly awkward smile.

"Sara!" the fair girl cried, unable to keep her voice in check. "Are you already able to walk around?! Is it safe?"

"Hmm? Uh, yeah. I guess I'm all right now, Elena." Sara gave a cheerful look to reassure her best friend. Elena smiled back, relieved and teary-eyed.

The girls were eating on the hospital's café terrace. Elena happily watched her best friend carry bites to her mouth. Before her treatment, Sara had been emaciated, only able to take in nutrients through an IV drip. But now, though her cure had barely finished, she had already filled out a bit.

Sara had eaten hesitantly at first, and only in small amounts. But she had beamed after tasting her first meal in ages, gradually taking larger and larger bites once she realized that her body could really digest food.

Elena smiled, more from seeing her friend well than from the taste of the food, as she savored their first meal together in a long, long time.

"Still, I can't believe you're already so much better. I guess that's Eastern tech for you. It was worth the ridiculously high price." A teasing note entered Elena's voice as she added, "You've even got some add-ons. Did they throw those in as a bonus?" She stared at Sara's bosom, which had once been almost flat (even when she was healthy) and was now quite voluptuous.

Sara grinned with a touch of embarrassment. "They said they used my chest for nanomachine storage. I'd need to get my body altered if I wanted to use external cartridges, and apparently they can't do that operation here."

"That's a good excuse."

"Jeez." Sara looked sullen, but she was enjoying the silly chitchat with her best friend. Suddenly, a look of loneliness came over her face. "I know you had to talk me into getting treatment here, but I really didn't want to die, and I'm glad that I stuck it out and pulled through." Her sad frown deepened. "Still, I guess this is goodbye. I can't go back to Central anymore."

The East and Central engaged in trade, but many goods were naturally subject to embargo, and restrictions on technological imports were particularly strict. Sara's nanomachines were contraband.

Storing nanomachines in one's body was an obvious trick for smuggling them into Central, and the authorities guarded against it with thorough screenings. Offenders were subject to immediate arrest and shot without warning if they resisted. When Central's wealthy elite received nanomachine treatments for otherwise-incurable diseases, they could not return until all traces of the technology were scrubbed from their bodies—a procedure that cost another small fortune.

Paying for the initial treatment had exhausted Elena and Sara's resources. Even if they scraped together the funds for removal, they couldn't go through with it—Sara would die the moment the nanomachines left her body. Strictly speaking, the machines hadn't cured her. They merely allowed her disease-ravaged cells to function on par with a healthy person's. Eastern medical technology could have healed her—but the fees, the waiting time, and the permits required from both the East and Central were all beyond the girls' means.

Now Sara couldn't return to Farageld's Central Quarter, let alone Central itself. And Elena would find it difficult to enter the Common Quarter too often, especially after the questionable measures she'd taken to bring Sara in. As Sara realized that this was probably their last chance to be together, she teared up and prepared to bid her best friend a reluctant farewell. Elena, however, had other ideas.

"What are you talking about?" she said breezily. "I'm staying here too, of course."

"What?" For a moment, Sara forgot her sadness, stunned at the idea. Then, as understanding dawned, she panicked. "H-Hang on, are you nuts?! You're going to stay *here*? No! You can go back! You *should* go back! D-Don't worry about me! I'll get by here just fine!"

"You expect me to believe that?" Elena asked, exasperated but matter-of-fact, in stark contrast to Sara's flustered shouts. "You were a bedridden little princess until recently. If I left you alone in a place like this, you probably wouldn't even last the night. I'm staying with you."

"Y-You can't!"

"I will."

They locked glares in silence. Each felt concerned for the other—felt she could not allow herself to back down.

As always, Sara caved first in the end. She breathed a resigned sigh and then grinned. It was hard to tell if she looked more happy or annoyed as she grumbled, “You really dig in your heels at times like this, Elena.”

“You bet I do. And my stubbornness kept you alive, so I don’t plan on fixing it.” Elena looked smug, which made Sara laugh.

Sara reflected that she probably shouldn’t have been surprised. Elena had overruled her to get them to Farageld in the first place, after all.

Once Elena saw, to her relief, that Sara had accepted her plan, she pulled a face and admitted, “I’ve got another reason for staying—I sold off a bunch of your stocks and deeds to pay for our travel expenses and your treatment, and to leave us some money to live on. I’ll be in real trouble if I show my face back there.”

“Y-You did?!” Sara spluttered, panicking again. “W-Was that a good idea?!”

“Don’t worry. They were in your name, and I’m your representative. I didn’t break any laws.”

“Th-That’s not what I mean.”

“If you’re worried about how it’ll affect *those* guys, I don’t care,” Elena said, her expression turning severe. “I’m not worried about people who wrote off your death as inevitable.”

Judging by her face, Sara still hadn’t made her peace with the situation like Elena had.

“Well, I made the call, so I’m the one they’ll resent for it,” Elena added, smiling to reassure her friend. “You shouldn’t blame yourself.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Sara responded indignantly. “I didn’t want to die, and I took you up on your offer and got you to bring me all the way out here for treatment. You just helped. So don’t hog all the blame.”

Elena looked surprised, then laughed. “Really? I guess that makes us partners in crime, then. Let’s keep up the good work.”

A look of dismay crossed Sara’s face. She grimaced, then smiled defiantly as she came to a resolution. “Of course,” she said. “I can hardly wait.”

The girls beamed at each other. They had always been together, and they hoped they always would be.

Later, the pair sat in their hotel room—a cheap one, at least by the standards of the Common Quarter—and discussed what to do going forward.

"So, Sara," Elena began, "I've been doing some thinking, and becoming relic hunters seems likely to be our best bet."

"Hunters?" Sara repeated. "I don't know much about them, but don't they fight those dangerous...'monsters'? That's what they call them in the East, right?"

"From what I can tell, hunters look for valuable artifacts, or 'relics,' in ruins of the Old World, as well as exterminating monsters in some place known as the wasteland."

"You're not sure?"

"There's only so much about the East I could look up from Central. I can't guarantee my info's even accurate."

"Still, they're called hunters, so they must hunt something, right?"

"It seems like they lump treasure hunters, monster hunters, and so on together under one label. I read that they have a different, official designation, but people don't even recognize it because 'hunter' is so ubiquitous."

"Wow." Sara sounded impressed with Elena's knowledge. But then she soon frowned. "It *is* dangerous, though, isn't it?"

"I guess, but the pay is worth it, they say," Elena replied. "So plenty of people from Central go East, hoping to strike it rich hunting. I hear that the really successful ones make more money than a small country."

"Th-That's amazing."

"Yeah. So, even if we don't do that well, we should be able to at least cover your nanomachine costs as long as things go smoothly."

The mention of the costs dampened their moods. Sara needed to keep paying for a fresh supply of nanomachines, or she would die. Both girls fell silent—Elena out of concern for her friend, Sara feeling guilty for dragging her friend into a dangerous line of work.

"Well, we'll figure something out," Elena continued, forcing her voice to sound cheerful. "A lot of hunters die on the job, but mostly because they head out into the wasteland without the right equipment. We'll be fine as long as we take the time to gear up first. And we should have enough

money left over to afford decent stuff." She sighed with affected regret. "I do wish those stocks had sold higher, though. Then we could have gotten some really superb equipment. But we were short on time, so I compromised and sold them on a market order."

"That's not your fault. Limit orders would have taken too long."

"Well, yeah. People would have caught on to what I was doing if I'd taken the time to maximize profits. It was a race against time."

And together they laughed, agreeing that there was nothing else Elena could have done and clearing the gloomy atmosphere. Then they went over their future plans—for the next day, in particular. In the end, they decided to move to Farageld's Eastern Quarter and become hunters there.

Passage from the Common Quarter to the Eastern Quarter was comparatively simple. The East didn't stop immigrants from Central—though, of course, it didn't take care of them either. Newcomers from the Common Quarter were usually paupers who dreamed of striking it rich. They went straight to the slums where, without funds or employment, most turned to hunting. Then they drifted farther east in search of greater profits. Many met their deaths every day, but their numbers never significantly declined, thanks to the steady flow of fresh blood from places like Farageld.

Going the other way, from the Eastern Quarter to the Common Quarter, was an altogether different story. Travelers needed to undergo thorough checks into their background and the purpose of their visit and then receive permission from the ELGC—measures to prevent smuggling and to stop valuable scientists from escaping to Central. Once they crossed into the Eastern Quarter, Elena and Sara knew, they would probably never get to come back. Even so, they were determined to make the trip.

For now, however, they forgot their worries about the future and chatted happily until they fell asleep.

◆

The next morning, Elena and Sara went straight from their hotel to the checkpoint, where would-be emigrants queued up for inspection. Every line moved swiftly. Anyone with ID could expedite procedures at the checkpoint by filling out inspection forms in advance. Those without could still cross with little difficulty—albeit with only the clothes on their backs and

through doors reserved for the lowest classes. People who took this route walked away without even the minimal identifying documents that came from passing inspection. Naturally, most were unable to find steady employment in the East, ultimately either dying in the slums or becoming hunters.

Just when Elena and Sara thought all they had left to do was line up and wait for their inspection, a familiar man barred their path.

"I figured I'd find you here," Palad said with a smirk. He was just shy of middle age, somewhat roughly dressed, and gave the impression of being good in a fight.

Elena stepped between Palad and Sara, looking fierce. Neither he nor she made any attempt to keep their animosity out of their body language.

"How did you know we'd be here?" she demanded, glaring at him.

"'Cause unlike everyone else, I'm not stupid," he smugly replied. "Those dumbasses haven't got a clue. They're convinced that you're either visiting hospitals in other countries or hiding out so you can at least spend her last moments together. But that's nothing like the real Elena, now, is it?"

Elena had done a lot of maneuvering to throw pursuers off their scent. Her scowl deepened as she realized Palad had seen through her and predicted her moves.

"Just to be clear," she said, "what do you want?"

"To return the little lady you ran off with, obviously. Oh, but no one told me to bring you back with her, so scram. I don't want a fuss."

"What a shame. You can't take Sara with you."

"Why? Because you're gonna stop me? Fat chance of that."

"No," Elena said, businesslike despite her scowl. "Sara received nanomachine treatment—the prohibited kind. So try all you like, but they'll stop her at the checkpoint on your way to Central. If you try to force your way through, they'll kill you along with her. Just give it up."

She considered her argument convincing—but kept her guard up just in case Palad went berserk. To her surprise, however, he was utterly unmoved.

"Oh, is that all? Not a problem."

"Wh-What do you mean?" she demanded, unable to hide her shock.

"Do you mean Father will allow my treatment here?" Sara asked hesitantly, emerging from behind Elena's back. "After he was so dead set against it?"

Had Sara's father approved, she wouldn't have to take Elena with her and go East after all. Sara now clung to that faint hope. Elena also wanted to believe, although she couldn't quite bring herself to—a "yes" would assure Sara's survival. But Palad shook his head, as if mocking their optimism.

"Nope. Seems the boss can't stomach a family member using Eastern tech. Sorry, but my orders are to bring her home dead or alive." He savored the girls' shocked reactions as he continued, "So, all I've gotta do is flush the nanomachines out of her before I take her through the checkpoint, and it's no skin off my nose if that kills her. With a corpse in hand, it'll be easy enough to pretend her treatment never happened."

The girls' faces fell. This man, they felt sure, would make good on his threats.

"Over my dead body!" Elena screamed, glaring daggers at Palad as she lunged forward. She burned with anger at the people who hounded Sara and with the desire to protect her friend. All her emotions drove her fist into the man's gut. He must have been overconfident, because he didn't even try to block. Elena felt her strike connect—felt certain of victory—but Palad's sneer turned her look of triumph to a grimace of surprise.

"You don't look it, but somehow you've got a couple times the raw strength of any normal person," he remarked. "That's why they called you a freak from the East back home—all except for the little lady here. No wonder you're attached to her."

"Shut up."

"This was always your plan, wasn't it? To go east with her if the treatment worked. But do you really think you'll have an easier time in your homeland?"

"Shut up!"

"Dragging your best friend off to die in that hellhole is awful selfish, if you ask me."

"Shut! Up!" Elena threw all her might behind another punch. Once again, her furious blow connected cleanly with Palad's torso. "I'll never let Sara die!"

Palad didn't even try to dodge. Her fist didn't faze his smug grin. "You can't save her! After all, I'm about to take you down!"

Elena kept punching for all she was worth. Her brawn had earned her

fear, disgust, and endless backbiting, but she depended on it now, pouring her determination into her fists as she struck Palad again and again. But he just stood there, and her blows had no effect. As shock and panic took hold of her, he laughed.

"I figured you'd be here, so of course I came prepared! This is military body armor I'm wearing! It may not measure up to Eastern gear, but it's more than good enough to shrug off anything you dish out!"

With that, Palad attacked. Elena had the edge in brute strength, but he surpassed her in skill, including hand-to-hand combat. In an instant, she was on the defensive. After taking a series of punches and kicks, she crumpled to the ground.

But even as she lay too hurt to move, with Palad's foot on her head, she moaned, "Sara, run..."

Sara stood motionless.

"Don't go anywhere, or she dies." Palad laughed again. "Guess I don't even have to bother with threats. You only even came here 'cause Elena told you to. You would've stayed in your bed at the mansion until you died otherwise. That's just who you are." He wasn't wrong—Sara would never have come this far if not for Elena's urging. "And that's why you can't do anything. You would've been better off dying in bed. Talk about stupid."

But Palad hadn't banked on Sara's resolve. Not in his wildest dreams did he imagine she would set her mind on living with Elena, who had promised to go East for her sake, and to do her utmost to ensure they succeeded.

Sara moved. Tears streamed down her face, but she didn't flinch as she charged Palad to save Elena. Her movements were amateurish and slow. Palad was startled—he'd assumed that standing around was all she was good for—but he sneered and didn't bother dodging. Then Sara's punch landed, and Palad went flying, military body armor and all.

"Wha—?!" He sailed through the air and slammed into the ground, where he lay on his back. One strike left him immobilized. "No way! The hell?! This can't be happening! Not even Elena can throw a punch like that—how can a girl who just got up off her sickbed?!"

Palad's face was a mask of panic. Nothing made sense. Sara trudged toward him—still crying, but with her eyes locked on him. And when she reached him, she brought her fist down on the man who hurt her best friend. His face contorted in terror just before another ferocious strike tore through

his armor. He passed out before he even had time to feel pain.

With Palad out of commission, Sara stood still for a moment, her rage subsiding. But as soon as she came to her senses, she rushed back to Elena's side and helped her rise.

"Elena, are you all right?"

"Y-Yes, I'm tougher than I look." Elena was more shocked and confused by Sara's surprising actions—and their even more surprising outcome—than she was to find herself out of harm's way. "What about you, Sara? Are you okay? What was that about?"

"I...I don't know."

"You *don't know*?"

Sara had rushed Palad out of desperation, but never for a moment had she expected to defeat him. The girls stared at each other, mystified. Then it finally clicked for Sara.

"Oh, that's right," she said. "The nanomachines I got are supposed to have strength-enhancing effects."

She remembered her doctor explaining that, because mass-produced nanomachines were designed for people who wanted strength-enhancing augmentations, hospitals found it cheaper to treat patients with these run-of-the-mill nanomachines, rather than to special-order models without those features. Sara had taken the recommendation and switched to the cheaper option, but after her operation she'd been amazed that she could simply stand upright, and the memory had completely slipped her mind.

"So that's it," Elena said. "Wait, Sara. Is it just me, or is your chest a little smaller?"

"Oh, right. Pushing my strength to the limit burns through nanomachines a lot faster."

For a moment, Elena seemed satisfied with the explanation. Then she suddenly panicked. "Hang on! You'll *die* if you use them all up, remember?! What were you thinking?!"

"What else was I supposed to do?!" Sara shouted back, equally flustered. "And I saved us both, so all's well that ends well!"

"It is not!"

"Is too!"

They argued for a bit and then found themselves laughing together. When they had finished, they finally stepped into the checkpoint.

◆

On the other side, a slum welcomed them to Farageld's Eastern Quarter —they had taken the underclass gate.

"I guess places like this are more or less the same everywhere. I was kind of expecting more," Elena remarked. She had been prepared for otherworldly Eastern sights, but the ramshackle scene before her wouldn't have been too out of place in Central.

"But we're in the East now, right? We've got to be careful," Sara said. She had never been to those parts of Central, so everything here was fresh to her.

"True enough. Why don't we start by getting our hunter registration over with? It should be that way. Let's go, Sara."

The Hunter Office assigned them an initial rank of ten, since they had crossed the border and brought a certain sum of money with them. Had they been broke, they would have been handed rank one slips of paper. They exchanged their currency at a bank adjoining the Office branch, then outfitted themselves at a shop in the same building.

With that, they were ready to hunt.

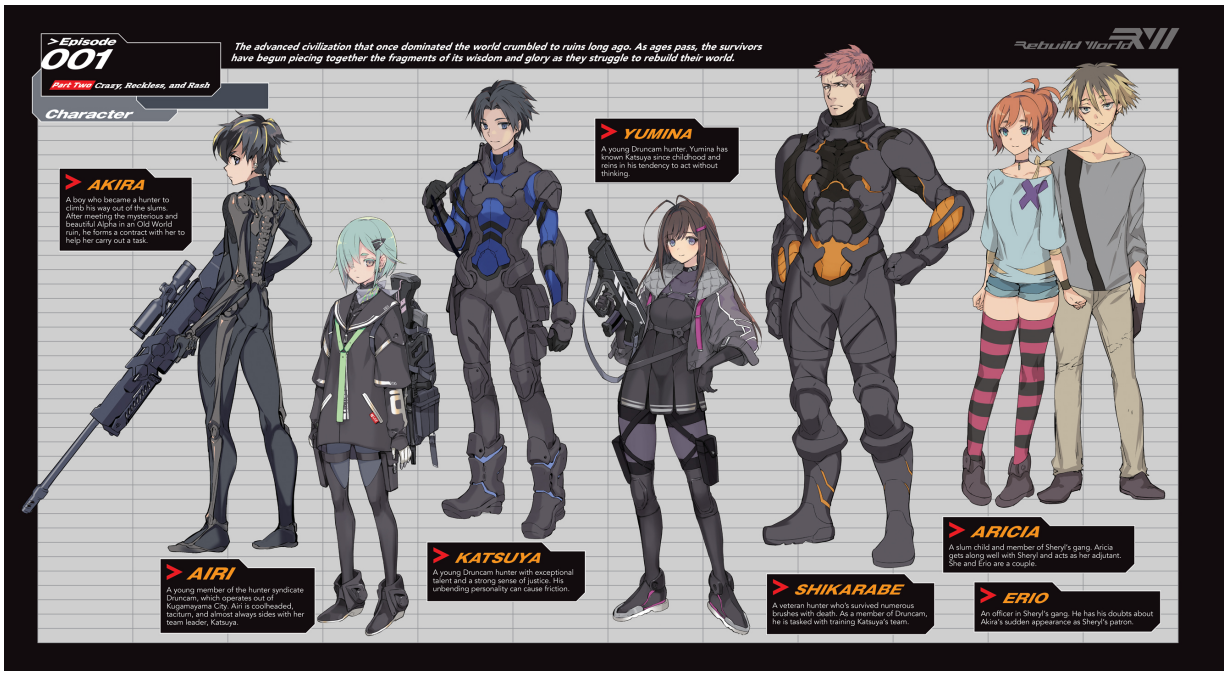
The beating Elena had suffered at Palad's hands had exposed her overdependence on her physical strength, so she bought a range of cheap scanners to expand her talents into other fields. Sara, meanwhile, thought that her newfound strength might make her good in a fight and picked out a set of somewhat oversized guns. From that moment on, their fighting styles were set in stone.

The girls looked at each other and laughed.

"I guess we're both hunters now," Elena said. "Well, Sara, I can't wait to work with you."

"Me too, Elena," Sara replied. "We'll pull this off together."

That day, two more run-of-the-mill hunters were born in the East. It would be several more years before they encountered Akira in the Kuzusuhara Town Ruins.


> Episode
001
Part Two Crazy, Reckless, and Rash
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"Just to be certain, you aren't willing to escape alone, are you?"
"Not until I'm the last one left."
Rebuild World RVII

>Episode
001

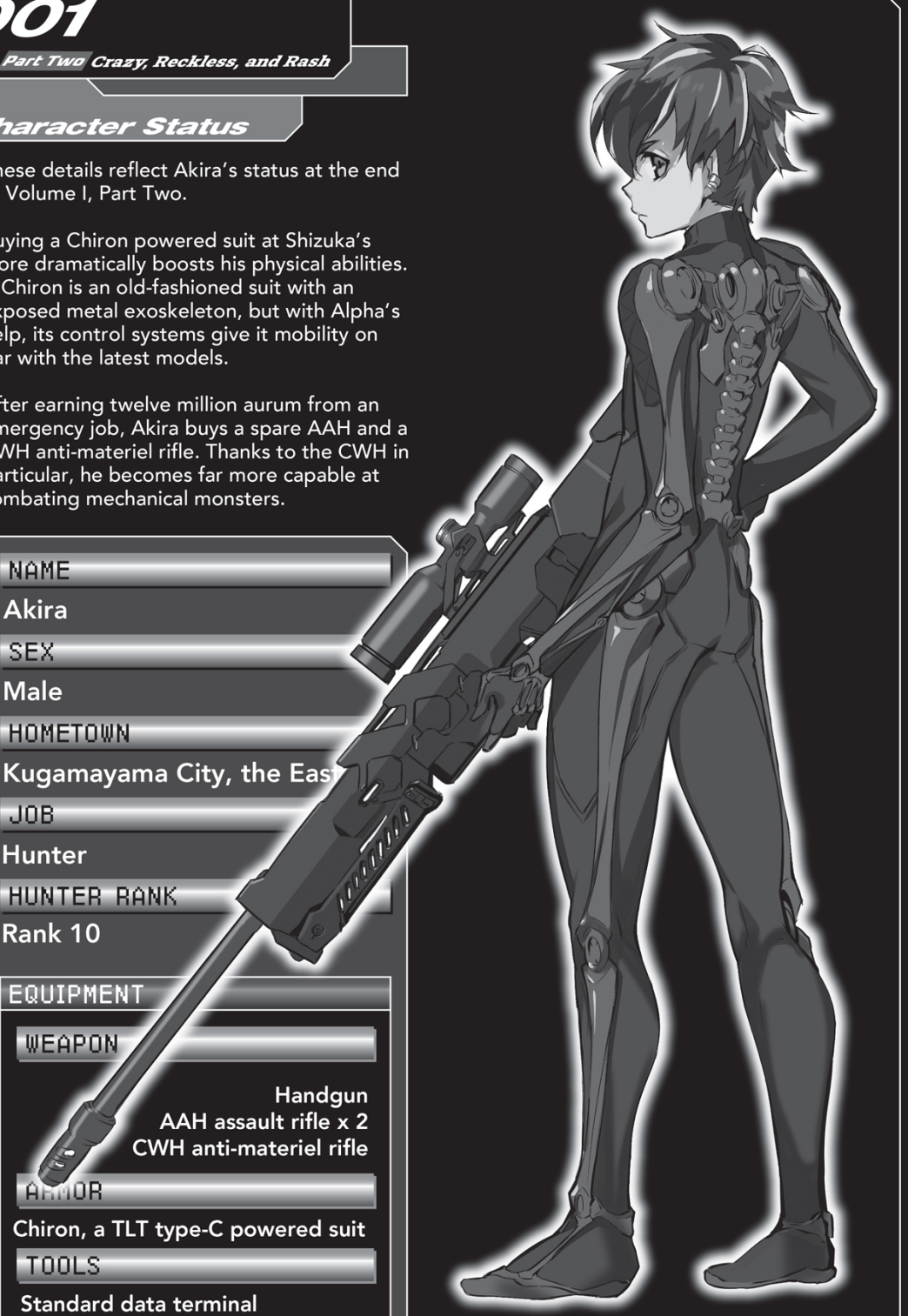
Part Two Crazy, Reckless, and Rash

Character Status

These details reflect Akira's status at the end of Volume I, Part Two.

Buying a Chiron powered suit at Shizuka's store dramatically boosts his physical abilities. A Chiron is an old-fashioned suit with an exposed metal exoskeleton, but with Alpha's help, its control systems give it mobility on par with the latest models.

After earning twelve million aurum from an emergency job, Akira buys a spare AAH and a CWH anti-materiel rifle. Thanks to the CWH in particular, he becomes far more capable at combating mechanical monsters.



NAME
Akira

SEX
Male

HOMETOWN
Kugamayama City, the East

JOB
Hunter

HUNTER RANK
Rank 10

EQUIPMENT

WEAPON
Handgun
AAH assault rifle x 2
CWH anti-materiel rifle

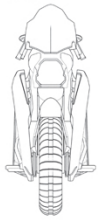
ARMOR
Chiron, a TLT type-C powered suit

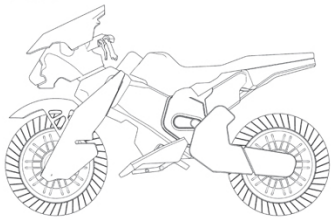
TOOLS
Standard data terminal
Good-luck charm

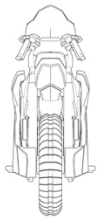
AKIRA

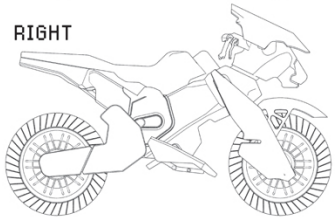
Weapon Guide

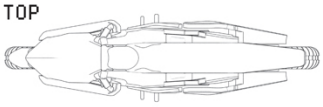
MOTORCYCLE

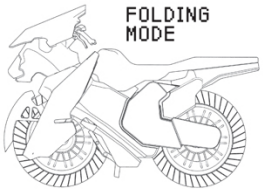


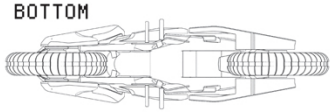








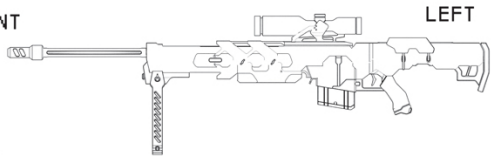


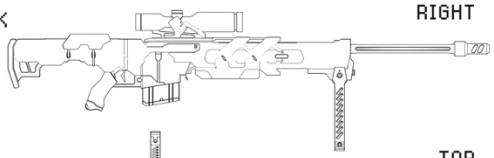


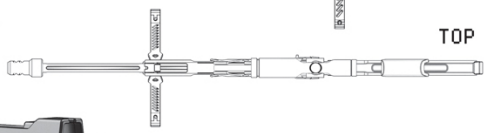
Akira received this motorbike as an advance on an emergency job. Despite being a collapsible model that Kibayashi kept in the passenger seat of his truck, it has two-wheel drive and can cut across the wasteland with ease.

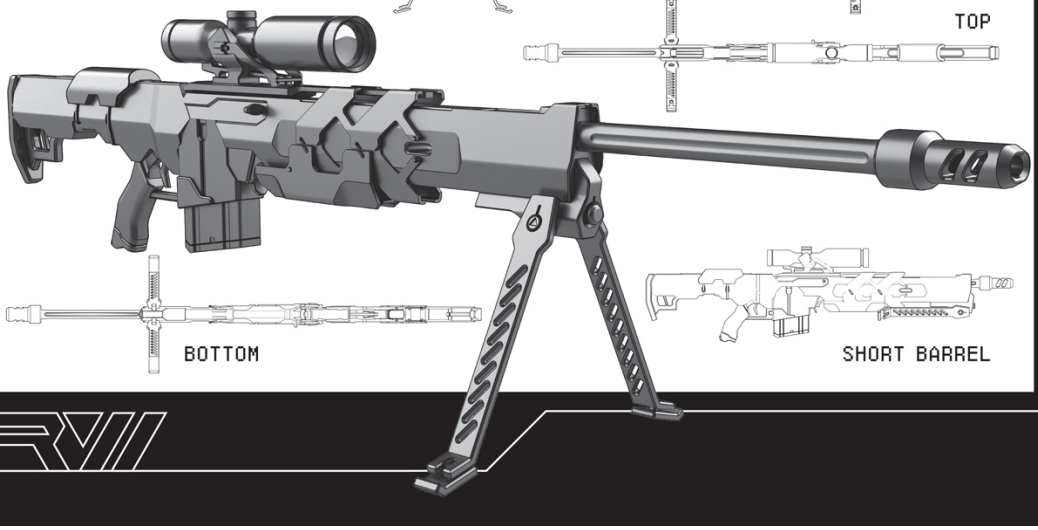
CWH ANTI-MATERIEL RIFLE

A high-caliber rifle designed to combat tough armored monsters.
Its proprietary armor-piercing cartridges boast the penetrating power to take down targets in a single shot, if one can handle the resulting recoil.
A telescoping barrel makes the long gun easier to carry.









>Episode
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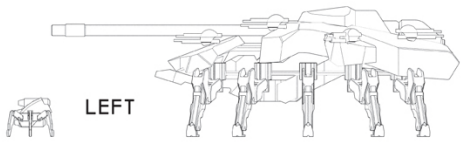
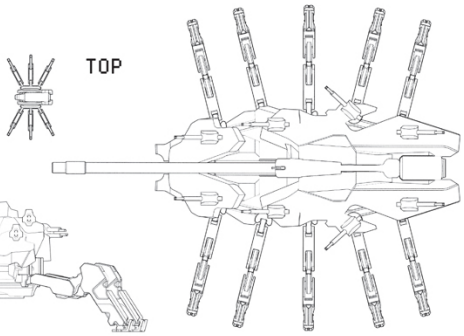
Part Two Crazy, Reckless, and Rash

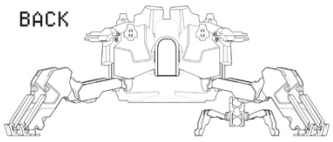
Monster Guide

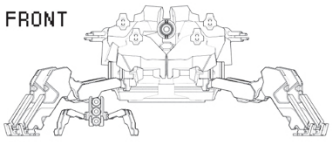
CANNON INSECT

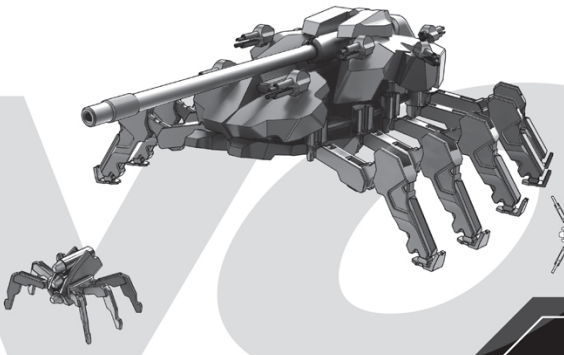
These autonomous weapon systems carry main guns meant for tanks on many-legged chassis the size of compact cars. Magazine-shaped supply drones accompany them. Although their armaments vary significantly, they work together as one to attack any target that enters their range.

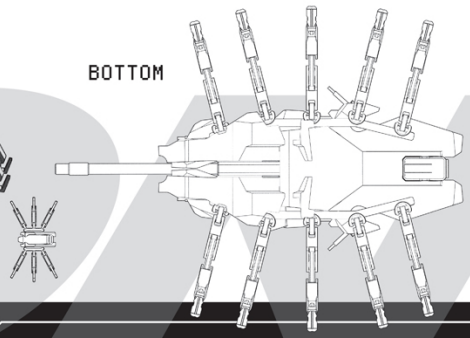


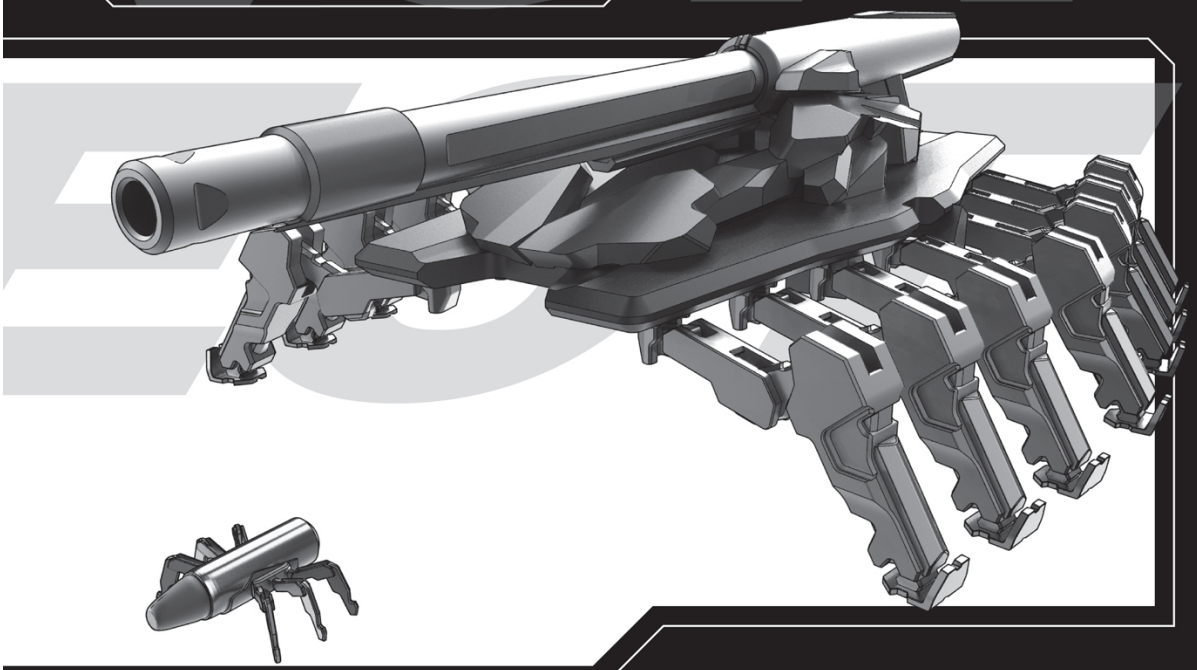






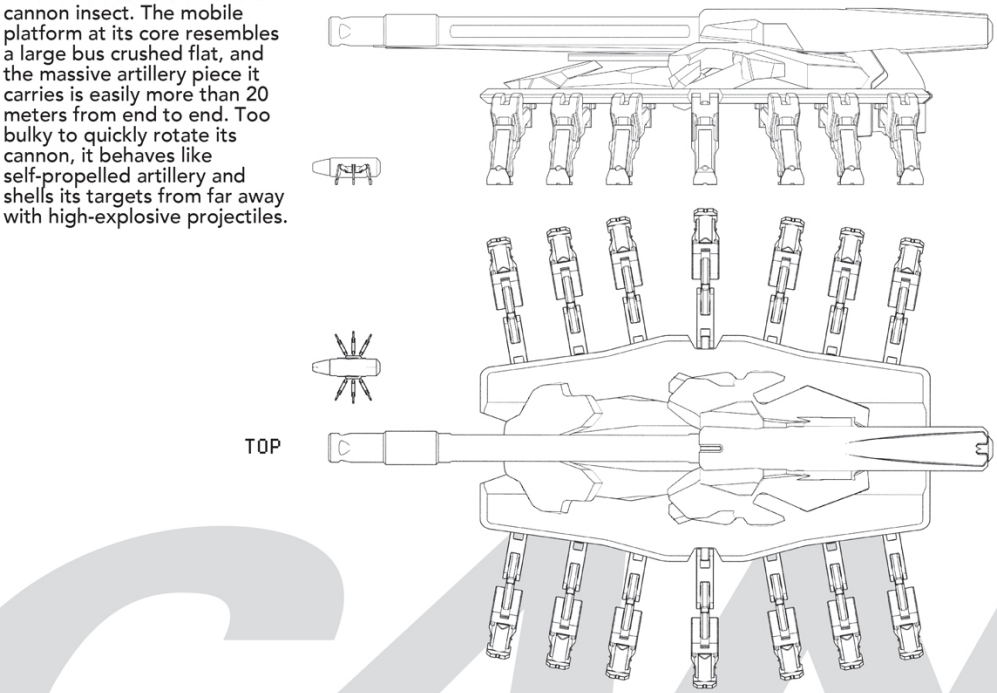


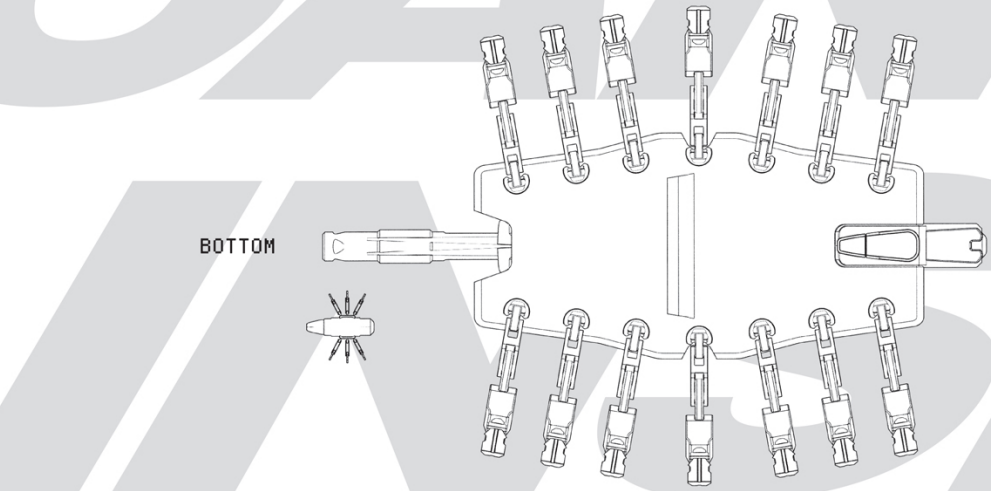


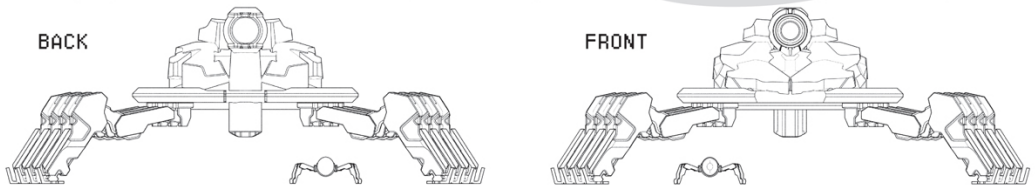


HUGE CANNON INSECT

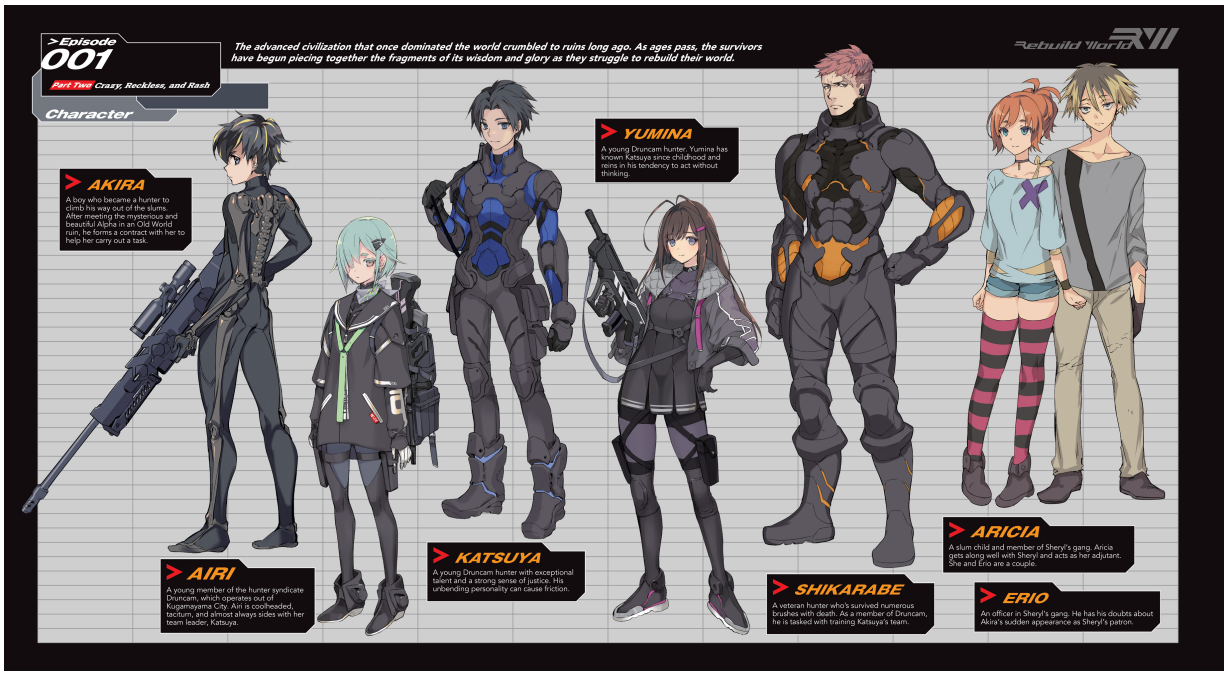
An anomalous version of the cannon insect. The mobile platform at its core resembles a large bus crushed flat, and the massive artillery piece it carries is easily more than 20 meters from end to end. Too bulky to quickly rotate its cannon, it behaves like self-propelled artillery and shells its targets from far away with high-explosive projectiles.







Author: Nahuse
Illustration: Gin
Environment Artist: Yish
Mechanical Designer: celi
Rebuild World I
Part Two
Crazy, Reckless, and Rash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An officer in Sheryl's gang. He has his doubts about Akira's sudden appearance as Sheryl's patron.

A swarm of massive cannons on legs was closing in from that direction. The force halted its advance at a uniform distance from the trucks. Each machine then adjusted its many legs to skillfully angle its body and guns and began bombarding the hunters. Shells thundered down around the trucks, kicking up clouds of dust over the entire area and blowing away the field of monster remains.
"Just to be certain, you aren't willing to escape alone, are you?"
"Not until I'm the last one left."
Rebuild World

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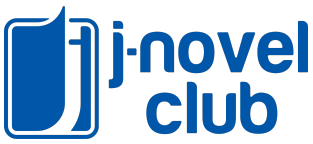

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REBUILD WORLD Vol. I Part 2: Crazy, Reckless, and Rash
by Nahuse

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